

Prelude (An Alec Winters Series, #1)

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Prelude, 1st eBook in the series, is currently permafrees.

Part I: Before

Chapter 1

At three-twenty-nine, the New Orleans high school campus was still and quiet in the sultry, subtropical climate. The sun-bleached white pavilion was in stark contrast to the lush greenery of palmetto bushes, bamboo palms, ficus, sheffalera plants, and thick St. Augustine grass that spread across the lawn. Not a sound could be heard anywhere. The live oak trees, dripping with Spanish moss, enhanced the overall calming silence and punctuated the oppressive humidity.

This period was a more tranquil and relaxed time...different than most people remember. It was a time before Columbine, before Facebook, before everyone had a cell phone or iPad. There were no campus security guards or checkpoints. Metal detectors and search dogs were a futuristic idea. There were no unauthorized search and seizures. The twin towers were still intact and Congress hadn't signed The Patriot Act. Hurricane Katrina, one of the costliest and deadliest storms ever to hit the United States, wouldn't smash the city to bits for another fifteen years.

It was a time when New Orleans was a thriving, bustling city with more than a million residents. The levees protected the people, their homes and businesses from the mighty Mississippi River's routine flooding as it had done since colonial times. It was a time when people felt safe.

It was a boom period when millions of visitors came to New Orleans for the sole purpose of "laissez les bon temps rouler," let the good times roll. During the annual Carnival celebrations, that's exactly what they did. 'Carnival' was a time to eat, drink, and celebrate life with music, friends, and good food. The city streets, filled with colorful parades and floats, marching bands, and vendors selling their exotic wares, buzzed with animated laughter and drunken antics. Intoxicated women flashed their boobs and drunken men laughed raucously while they threw colorful beads at the display. Numerous venues around town hosted enchanting balls and other holiday celebrations. All these festivities led up to Mardi Gras or 'Fat Tuesday.' After the merriment of wild revelry, parties, and feasts, Lent or fasting began.

Now, only a moment later, a bell rang inside the wide school halls, and within seconds, the triple-doors burst open, shattering the heavy stillness much like fine crystal shatters against a marble mantel. The noise was deafening as students poured outside onto the flat porch, stairs, and lawn. A few minutes later, Alec Winters raced down the front steps two at a time with Chaz Lambert, a good friend, close behind him.

Alec, a sixteen-year-old junior, skillfully avoided the throng of student groups gathered around the school's entrance. His athletic ability and style was truly graceful, almost elegant, as he deftly dodged and sidestepped the excited, chattering crowds. It was one of the main reasons Coach Taylor, the varsity football coach, had his eye on him. As a freshman and junior varsity quarterback, Alec had never been sacked. He weaved, dodged, and swayed as if his moves were choreographed. The other players couldn't get a hand on him. He'd make a fine starting quarterback, probably their best chance ever for a winning season and a chance at the 1992 state title.

"Hiya Alec," a group of giggly teenage girls harmoniously called out as soon as they saw him. Some twirled their highlighted hair around a finger and grinned, others swayed their hips

suggestively in an attempt to attract his attention. One, Danaé Chisholm, managed to get close enough to whisper in his ear, “I’m exactly right for you, Alec.” She pressed a small handwritten note into his palm. It repeated the message and included her phone number. Danaé held a hand to her ear imitating a telephone and mouthed, “Call me.”

Surprised by her forwardness, and just a bit overwhelmed by strange, appealing pheromones emanating from Danaé, Alec still didn’t miss a beat. He brushed off the illusive and fleeting attraction that attempted to draw him in. After nodding a quick, polite response to the group, the tall, clean-cut, sandy-haired teenager turned away. The more distance he put between Danaé and himself, the less he noticed her mysterious pull. He handed the note off to Chaz with a bemused grin.

“I think this must be for you.”

“Danaé wants you, not me,” Chaz emphasized as he wadded the note and dropped it into a strategically placed trashcan. “They all want you, but she has the courage to make it obvious. We’ve known each other since middle school, Alec, and it’s always the same story. The girls want you. *‘Call me; call me. Pick me, Alec,’*” Chaz teased in a high singsong voice. He bumped his shoulder into his friend to stress the point. “They can’t grasp the fact that you’re already taken, my man.”

It wasn’t an assumption that all the girls wanted Alec. They did...and everyone knew it. He was the most popular student on campus. Not only was he incredibly appealing to the eyes, he was the next Bobby Hebert or Archie Manning. The girls dreamed of riding on his arm all the way to the National Football League.

Alec’s startling blue eyes searched the swarm of students for the only face he cared to see in the bustling crowd—Sabrina Devereux. She wasn’t part of the various well-liked and fashionable cliques, but she wasn’t into that scene and didn’t let it bother her. She was too studious and focused on her goals for that foolishness. She sat alone on one of the two large, square pedestals at the base of the porch. Alec slowed slightly, and reaching out, gently squeezed her elbow as he passed by.

Sabrina looked up briefly, flashed a dazzling smile before adding the usual self-assured response, “Take your time with Catalina. When you get back, I’ll be in the bleachers. Chaz will keep me company and then he’ll walk me over to the field.” Alec smiled in response and continued on his way.

Chaz, a slender blond-haired sophomore, had known Sabrina since they were toddlers. The Lamberts and Devereux’s had known each other socially for decades. They went to the same church and arranged for their children to play together. Chaz and Sabrina, both only children, had even gone to kindergarten together at Catholic school. It was a long-standing friendship.

Once Alec reached the sidewalk and was clear of most of the other students, he quickly covered the six city blocks to the nearby middle school.

When he first began to walk his younger sister to and from school, he was nine years old and she was five. It had since become their routine. They depended on each other. He laughed softly as he thought about the early days. When Cat, short for Catalina, was in kindergarten, she had tearfully clung to his hand, fearful of the new schedule and being away from home. However, by the second week of each new school year, she had grown more confident and was eager to get inside with classmates to begin the day.

At the beginning of middle school, which at that time was fourth through sixth grades, she began to shake off his protective hand and indignantly chided, “I’m not a baby, Alec.” Then, as she surreptitiously looked around the schoolyard, she whispered, “I like for you to hold my hand, but just not all the way to the front door, ok.” Knowing that independence would carry her far, Alec had

chuckled at Cat's grab for self-reliance. With parents such as Buck and Cassidy Winters, he knew she would need all the freedom and fortitude she could gather.

"Well, what about junior high school?" he had jokingly asked. "You won't need me anymore by the time you get to seventh grade, will you?"

"Oh," Cat had gasped as a hand fluttered to her throat, "of course I will need you. I'll always need you, Alec. You're my big brother!"

Now, as he neared his sister's school, he could see Catalina sitting on the lowest step. Her long, naturally wavy, white-blond hair caught dazzling rays from the sun, and for a moment, it looked as if a halo encircled her head. She waited patiently for Alec's arrival.

She's so tiny, Alec silently thought as he watched Cat sitting there alone.

An overwhelming wave of tenderness washed over him. Most of the other students, even those in lower grades, were much taller and larger than his petite twelve-year-old sister was. She was barely four feet ten inches tall and weighed about eighty pounds. The gentle affection he felt for her quickly turned to empathy. Cat had it much tougher than he'd had it at her age. When she needed a mother's love the most, she hadn't received the daily nurturing and maternal care he'd gotten from their mother.

It certainly had nothing to do with Catalina, he silently surmised.

She was a great kid and deserved better. She also needed more care and affection than he was able to provide alone. However, when he was younger, Cassidy was different. Then, she had been a good mother, always putting her children first. Alec knew that somewhere, along the path of life, that had changed and it saddened him.

Logically, Alec knew very well that his mother's current condition was beyond anyone's control. Nothing he or Catalina did could stir her from the dazed state that had crept up on all of them. She had simply slipped away. He knew he couldn't force her to change, to awaken—not until she was ready anyway. He understood that people don't and can't change until they're willing to do so.

Chapter 2

Alec was born and reared in the city of New Orleans. Often called more colorful, exotic names—Nawlins, the Big Easy, Crescent City, Mardi Gras City, and the Birthplace of Jazz—each name described an aspect of the famous French-Cajun city since its establishment in 1718. Crescent City became a popular nickname when the French Quarter expanded, following the natural curve or crescent shape of the Mississippi River.

New Orleans was certainly resilient—a city that kept crawling back for more no matter how the odds were stacked against it. Ever since the Hurricane of 1947, which had claimed fifty-one innocent lives, the Crescent City and its residents pushed on. By 1971, the below sea level city had been hit by five additional major storms, the worst of which was Betsy in 1965. Hurricane Betsy claimed seventy-five lives. Faced with life-threatening dangers again and again, the residents of New Orleans had somehow managed to stay alive, to dig themselves out of the rubble, and once again rebuild their city.

Alec's mother, Cassidy, owned a home on Carrollton Avenue. She had inherited the large two-story from her parents, Martin and Jazibella Saguache. The residence had been passed down for more than five generations in the Saguache family. The surname, pronounced Suh-watch, meant 'blue earth or blue water' and each family member had indeed inherited startling blue eyes. The Saguache eyes were as blue as the Caribbean Sea, as blue as a cloudless sky. It was their most defining and striking feature.

During Alec's younger years, Cassidy was gentle and kind, but after the long, endless days of marriage to Buck Winters, she'd changed. Her husband had effectively hidden his raunchy, carousing lifestyle for the first seven years of their marriage. After Catalina was born, he felt confident that Cassidy would never leave him. He intrinsically knew that his prudish wife would never choose to be a single mother with two young children in the dog-eat-dog city of New Orleans. He knew she would never leave the family home either.

Buck was right about that, Cassidy felt trapped. Nevertheless, it was more than that. She grew disillusioned and disheartened. Her life had not progressed the way she'd thought it would and she was truly miserable. If the truth was known about the situation, she had never wanted to marry Buck Winters. In fact, Cassidy had fallen in love with Zach Weaver during high school and had dreamed of a happily-married life with him. However, when push came to shove, she hardly had a say in the matter.

Even though Martin and Jazibella Saguache had never gone into ancestral or biological details about their objection to Zack, they forbid the union. Her parents had merely insisted that their daughter marry Buck Winters. According to both of them, he was a perfect match—if she wanted to have a family and children. Cassidy definitely wanted to have children, but because her parents were secretive and mysterious, the importance and significance of a 'perfect match' was lost on her.

In the beginning, Cassidy had welcomed Buck into her bed. Although he was a tall and powerful man with a good job, there was something else appealing about him, something that she couldn't quite define. He possessed a charisma that drew her in. Even after all this time, she still couldn't name the attraction but she suspected it was sensory...a smell, a scent of some kind that she had once found appealing and attractive, almost irresistible.

In all reality, it was a cosmic mating call that Cassidy would never understand because her parents hadn't shared the information with her. They failed to explain the genetic implications or

that the Saguache line had to continue no matter what the cost. Unfortunately, whatever the attraction to Buck, it didn't last long. It was gone as soon as she became pregnant with Catalina.

After that, Buck revealed his true nature. He had a penchant for too much drink and too many women. He no longer sought out his wife to fulfill his sexual needs. Without the 'matrimonial-glue' that normally binds a couple together, he became cold and hostile. He no longer showed any care or concern for her or the children either. Cassidy felt trapped in a loveless marriage.

Each time Buck betrayed her, and he cheated on her often, another piece of her joy died. Cassidy had become a little more cynical and a little more resentful about her circumstances. She was certain that marriage to Zack Weaver would've resulted in a happier life. She blamed her parents for the misery she suffered and never forgave them before their deaths.

Once, Cassidy had seen the possibilities in life and the beauty in everything. She had encouraged her children from a metaphysical perspective, quoting many simple, yet profound, philosophies from great teachers. Alec remembered his mother had often said that 'everything is exactly as it's supposed to be.'

At one time, she had faith that everything was connected; everything was perfect. She believed that gratitude was the key to true happiness. Eventually, with no way out of the loveless marriage to Buck, she couldn't find anything for which she felt grateful. Alec wasn't a fool; he saw the damage done by both his parents. Now, he wasn't sure that his mother had faith in anything anymore. In fact, he wasn't sure what she believed.

Cassidy's early principles of faith weren't commonly accepted in the staunch Catholic bible-toting population of New Orleans. Many of the good Christian folk in the area shunned the young mother. They agreed with her hedonistic husband who ridiculed her for such foolish beliefs. He called her faith 'pathetic.' He often told her she was 'grasping at straws.'

Eventually, outnumbered, worn down, and isolated, she observed the shambles of her life only to lose any remaining faith. Cassidy reasoned that, without the ability to create effective change, life was pointless. Without faith, she began to deteriorate physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Life isn't always likened to slipping on a banana peel and falling to the ground. Sometimes, it is a long, scary slide to the deepest regions of despair. Such was the case for Cassidy. Now, she was a blackout drunk, lying on the sofa in a complete stupor, unaware of the condition of her surroundings and blind to the fact that her family was falling apart. Their home life had drastically changed.

Cat missed the very best of our mother and it isn't fair, Alec thought.

It wasn't fair to any of them, but most of all it wasn't fair to Catalina—she deserved so much better.

About the Author

Chariss K Walker, M. Msc., an award-winning author, writes fiction and nonfiction books with a metaphysical message. All of her books are sold in soft-cover and eBook formats worldwide, many are in large print. To find out more about Chariss, visit her website at www.chariss.com.

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