

FALSE RIVER *(novel excerpt)*

By Stinson Carter

The Cathedral bells knocked Cam out of dreamless sleep into a cold and dewy Sunday morning. As the clangs rattled his teeth, he crawled out from the hibiscus bushes to get a jump on the morning Mass crowd.

He hopped the fence onto Royal Street and drew stares from a horse-drawn carriage passing by with the day's first batch of tourists. The driver was warming up his hangover voice with lies about ghosts and old battles— weaving a peculiar history in which Napoleon and Andrew Jackson were not only contemporaries, but even fought alongside one another in the Battle of New Orleans. It was clear to Cam that the twenty-dollars these Yankees paid wasn't for the history lesson as much as for the sound of horse hooves clacking on the cobblestones.

As the carriage went off and left things quiet again, the silence of an empty Sunday morning street handed him the hard truth that sleeping in the St. Louis Cathedral prayer garden left him no less tired than he was when he collapsed there at 4am, and thanks to the fresh topsoil he was as dirty as he was stranded. He knew if he was going to have a fighting chance of somehow conning forty bucks by the day's last Greyhound to Shreveport, he'd have to find a way to look presentable at best and trustworthy at least.

He was still brushing dead leaves from his hair and soil from his shirt when he saw the sign on the rooftop of the Hotel Monteleone. When the Fairmont people bought the Roosevelt, defiant purists switched to the Windsor Court and the Monteleone. His grandfather was part of the Monteleone group, so any family trip down here with him and Munna always meant they'd get to stay there.

False River by Stinson Carter

Cam followed the neon beacon for several blocks to the hotel's main entrance.

"Welcome back, sir," said the doorman.

Cam couldn't take the man's mistake for a change of his luck, since he knew a hotel doorman shift at this hour of Sabbath in this town was probably always just a welcome committee for the stragglers of Saturday night.

"Good to see you again," said Cam.

They smiled at each other so warmly you'd have thought at least one of them had it right.

Cam stepped through the doorway and walked up a short flight of marble stairs to the entryway, where a massive crystal chandelier hung in a clerestory of mirror-paned faux Palladium windows. Immediately to his right was the Carousel Bar: a purple and gold carousel with asses on stools instead of ponies on poles, revolving around the bartender about every fifteen minutes.

Just beyond the bar's entrance were the elevators—a safe distance from the front desk. He pushed the up arrow button and the elevator was already there. He stepped inside and touched the button by the brass plate with "Health Club" engraved on it, and rode up to the top floor. Leaving the elevator, he spotted a half-eaten continental breakfast on a room service tray outside a room. He waited for a chambermaid at the other end of the hallway to disappear into a service closet, then snatched an uneaten Danish and a cluster of grapes off the tray and ate them on his way up a half-story flight of stairs to the health club.

There wasn't a single other soul in the men's lounge at that early hour. He dumped his clothes in a locker, stretched an elastic key cord around his ankle and headed for the shower.

After a thirty-minute scrub-down with every condiment they kept stocked in there, Cam wrapped a warm towel around his waist and gave himself a long look in the mirror over the sinks. He looked like hell from lack of sleep, and he knew anybody he'd try to hit up for his bus fare home would trust a rested face easier than they would the one in the mirror. Another hour or two of sleep could do for his eyes what the hot water did for his body, and he was still too tired to charm any money out of anybody anyway. So he went outside to the pool in his towel to nap on a lounge chair, where the sun could excuse his closed eyes.

He woke up around mid-morning to the voice of a mother yelling at her children for running around the pool. He'd gotten a few good hours of sleep under his belt, so he got up and headed back into the men's lounge.

He drank a few icy cups of water from a cooler, then went into the sauna and leaned against the cedar paneling for a final purge of last night's luck. After about ten minutes, a man stepped into the sauna and sat next to him. Cam gauged the man to be about his father's age, even though he doesn't know how old his father is exactly. The man was heavy in the belly but his arms and legs

False River by Stinson Carter

were well muscled and his face was clearly once handsome. The man began to stretch, reaching out hopelessly towards his toes and letting out shallow, gasping breaths with every attempt. After a few minutes he seemed satisfied with whatever he was going for, leaned back against the wood and closed his eyes.

After a breath or two of silence, the man's eyes crept open. "You sweatin' out last night, too?"

"Yeah," said Cam.

Cam pictured the man waddling down Bourbon Street with a daiquiri in a plastic hand grenade, scanning the bar balconies for flashes of tit.

"Don Moorefield," the man said, offering his hand.

"Cam... Daltry."

They shook hands, then the man's glance drifted to the floor and he got the distracted look of someone doing math in his head.

"Dal-try... you're not a Shreveport Daltry, are you?" Cam hesitated before nodding.

"Commercial National Bank Daltrys?"

"That's the one," said Cam.

"He was a damn fine banker, your..."

"Grandfather."

"A damn fine banker."

Cam felt his father's failed conceits in the smug charge he got from taking credit for his grandfather's good name. But he took it anyway, figuring if there was anything left in that name that his father hadn't squandered it was surely his due.

"I run a freight company out of Monroe. Financed my first fleet through Commercial National."

"It was a... good bank," said Cam, just to say something.

"Sure was," said Don, after allowing a pause of reverence. "What brings you to New Orleans?"

Cam took a moment, stretched his legs and let the heat work his hamstrings out. A little burn came to the backs of his knees, and then faded as they rediscovered the Running Back's flexibility they once knew. "I'm looking at law schools," Cam decided.

"Which ones?"

"Tulane's my first choice."

"Damn good school."

"Yeah, it's definitely..."

"For next fall?"

"If all goes well."

False River by Stinson Carter

"I wouldn't worry too much, seem like you got your head screwed on right."

Cam smiled and Don mistook his irony for agreement.

"I'm just in town visiting my daughter," said Don. "She's about your age, a junior at Loyola. You oughtta meet her."

"Yeah..." said Cam, trailing off into a quiet curiosity about what a younger female version of this man might look like.

"Matter of fact, I'm takin' her to lunch at Galatoire's in a little bit. You should join us if you're not busy."

"That'd be nice," said Cam, as a plan began taking shape. After dinner, he'd pull Don aside and make up a story that he got pick-pocketed and can't cover his bus fare home tonight. He'd ask for a loan, and even make a joke of it: the banker's grandson getting a loan from the same man his granddaddy gave one to, "the tables have turned," that kind of thing. He'd get the address to send the money back to Monroe, then apologize while Don handed over a couple of twenties that mean nothing to his pocket and everything to Cam's.

Don got up and stretched his arms up over his head. "Bout to burn up in here, why don't you meet us in the lobby in forty-five minutes."

"Sounds like a plan," said Cam, hearing his father in the phrase and biting his tongue for once again breaking a promise to himself to sound like a man on his own terms.

Don opened the door and choked on the colder air as he left the sauna.

Cam stood in a towel by his locker, trying to examine his clothes from the viewpoint of Don, the daughter, and the maitre d' at Galatoire's. His khakis were passable after he re-creased them and pressed out the wrinkles by hand, but the entire back of his shirt was stained black from the topsoil. He went back into the shower room, filled up one of the sinks where other men were shaving, and tried to wash his shirt with a few pumps of hand soap. He got the white oxford back to a pale brown, then hung it from the lip of the sink and went at it with a hair dryer. The shavers glared at Cam's laundry operation and an old black attendant dropped his load of towels on a bench and shuffled over.

"Jus' take it down to the laundry room," said the attendant.

"Where's that?"

"Take the elevator to the mezz'nine, they fix it up clean and drop it by ye' room fo ye'."

Cam nodded in thanks, slipped into his pants and his wet shirt, stepped into his loafers and headed for the mezzanine.

False River by Stinson Carter

The elevator doors opened onto a naked drywall hallway at the mezzanine level. He followed the warm, humid smell of detergent and starch and began to feel the rumble of tumble-drying and spin cycles in his feet. Outside the cart-battered double doors to the laundry room was a wheeled metal rack of clothes awaiting delivery to rooms. He checked both ways down the hall before sifting through them. He stopped at a tailor-made blue broadcloth dress shirt, roughly his size, pulled it from the rack and hustled back to the elevator.

“S’cuse me, sir,” a voice boomed from the far end of the hallway.

Cam glanced over his shoulder at a thick-armed black woman in a white laundry uniform coming at him like a bull on the charge.

“I need a room number on that shirt!” she yelled.

The elevator doors slid open and Cam jumped inside. He heard her heavy footsteps barreling down the hallway as he pushed the “close doors” button. He pulled off his shirt and put on the new one; leaving it un-tucked enough to hide the fact that he forgot to put on a belt the day before when his father dragged him to the Shreveport police station from his mother’s apartment. He was buttoning up his pants when the doors opened onto the lobby. He caught a confused look from a bellboy on his way in with a luggage cart, but kept his calm and wrapped his old shirt in the new shirt’s plastic and tossed it along with the hanger into a polished brass lobby trashcan.

Cam caught sight of a waving hand in the corner of his eye and looked where came from. Don was standing and the girl was sitting beside him on a flowery loveseat. For the moment she was facing away from Cam, but he knew by way she sat that she’d built her poise on the stares of men. So as he crossed the lobby, he tried to prepare himself to not be just another one of them.

“Young Master Daltry,” said Don, with playful grandeur. “This is Elizabeth.”

“You must favor your mother,” said Cam, the way Southern men tease to foster familiarity when they’re nervous.

Don gives a hearty single-hack laugh.

“You must favor yourself,” she said coolly.

Cam offered his hand but stopped short when he remembered Munna telling him to never be the first to offer a hand with a woman.

Elizabeth noticed his wrestling with manners, grabbed his hand and gave it a firm shake as she looked over at her father like it was the first time the two of them had ever agreed on a boy’s potential.

Cam ushered the small talk outside to avoid a run-in with the laundress he assumed would be showing up on the next elevator.

They walked up Royal Street to Bienville and crossed the Quarter towards Bourbon on foot.

False River by Stinson Carter

Don insisted on the street side and Elizabeth walked between them. Piecing her together through a series of awed glances out of the corner of his eye, Cam got butterflies he hadn't felt since he was sixteen.

Elizabeth stood as tall as Cam in her wedge Espadrilles. Her quick brown eyes made it hard to get an unnoticed look at her face, but he could tell it involved a small straight nose, long plump lips, and a sharp but delicate jaw. Her coffee-brown hair was cut short and pinned back, showing off her long neck and thin broad shoulders. The bare skin below her neck met her linen sundress at the faintly tan-lined upper reaches of her small firm breasts. Her hips were wider than her thin waist would suggest, but well sculpted, and necessary to her long athletic legs.

Cam assumed her easy confidence was just the natural outcome of being pretty enough to get by on looks alone, but smart enough to at least try not to. At times she seemed almost self-conscious about the fact that her natural walk deserved flashbulbs and a runway. When she talked, she animated her arms like an excited child and she wasn't afraid of her loud laugh. Listening to her talk Christmas plans with her father, Cam noticed the gulf between their accents—three years of college had worn her upstate twang down to nothing more than the occasional indulged vowel.

Elizabeth turned to Cam and he felt suddenly caught, as if she'd just looked out her open window into the lenses of his binoculars.

"Hey," he said quickly.

"So you're going to Tulane Law next year?"

Cam took a few steps before answering. "If everything works out."

"Where are you doing your undergrad?"

Another few footsteps filled the silence.

"Centenary," said Cam, the first decent place he could think of that wasn't his father's alma mater.

"What kind of law do you want to study?"

"Defense," said Cam, fighting off a smirk.

"That's great," she said.

"There's a real nobility to that, Cam," said Don.

Cam's conscience didn't let him muster even the simple nod that he tried for in response.

"What's your major at Loyola?"

"Literature," said Elizabeth.

"Nice... what do you want to do?"

"Thank you," said Don.

Elizabeth didn't even go to the trouble of rolling her eyes—she'd clearly already won this little battle so handily that her knowing smile was enough to shut her father up.

"I wish I'd done some of that," said Cam; the first honest thing he'd told her since his name.

False River by Stinson Carter

Cam kept her going with follow-up questions so he could fill the conversation with anything other than more of his own lies. When she finished going through her opinions about New Orleans, graduation plans, and siblings' names and ages, Cam moved on to her father and did his best job of talking shop with him about the freight business. He agreed that shipping is the backbone of capitalism, and pretended to understand how hard it is to stay competitive when oil is as high as it is. But as he nodded dutifully, he struggled to keep his eyes off of Elizabeth.

A block shy of Bourbon Street on Bienville, Cam felt a stare and looked up into the eyes of a man leaning against the front window of Acme Oyster House. The man was dodging the arriving and departing customers as if his only business there was using the awning for a shaded place to smoke. After his and Cam's eyes met, he stamped out his half-smoked cigarette and wiped his fingers on the leg of his jeans. Cam started tripping up in conversation and tried to keep it going with a few vague "yeahs" and "uh-huhs." He kept his eyes on the pavement as his body went rigid, talking himself through every step he took just to keep moving.

"Hey boss," said Johnny.

Don and Elizabeth glanced at Johnny and then back at Cam to see if his face registered any recognition. Cam tried his best to not let on anything but complete ignorance.

"I'm sorry, man," said Johnny.

Cam ignored Johnny but Don and Elizabeth stopped anyway.

"I wanna buy you a whiskey. Come by the casino later, I'll be there."

Cam smiled at Don and Elizabeth as if embarrassed for the crazy stranger.

"I think you got the wrong guy," said Cam.

"I been on a bad road, but I'm gettin' off it," said Johnny, with the steadiness of an oath.

"You got the wrong guy," Cam repeated.

"I'm tryin' to be straight with you, I ain't said this stuff to anybody."

"Look, he said you got the wrong guy, you got the wrong guy," said Don, putting an arm on Cam's and Elizabeth's shoulders to lead them away.

"This ain't about you," said Johnny.

"Well it's gonna be about the cops if you don't get off our backs," Don warned.

"He already made it about the cops," said Johnny, with a wicked grin to Cam.

Cam shrugged at Don and Elizabeth and they kept on walking.

"Don't treat me like I ain't nobody," said Johnny, his hard edge returning to his voice in full.

Cam didn't look back, but he knew Johnny was standing there in the middle of the sidewalk staring at him. And he felt Johnny's eyes on his back until they turned onto Bourbon.

False River by Stinson Carter

Neither Don nor Elizabeth asked Cam a single question about the guy on the street. And Cam figured it probably never even occurred to them that he could've had any interaction with a guy like that. Because they're the type that believes the lines between different lots of people are drawn with thicker things than blood and luck.

The maitre d' at Galatoire's knew the Moorefields by face, and led them without a wait around a line of twenty people to a table by the window. Old men waiters in black coats and bowties placed white linen napkins on their laps, and food soon began appearing without them even ordering. The waiters announced the arriving platters like butlers introducing guests at a ritzy party: asparagus with béarnaise sauce, oysters Bienville, crabmeat au gratin, and trout meuniere amandine. As they moved from each course to the next, Cam quietly thanked Munna for the etiquette lessons around her dining room table where he learned the name and purpose of every piece in a formal setting; down to the marrow forks, the fish knives, and the dessert spoons. At the very least, thought Cam, he can be a gentleman while he eats.

With the food came a steady stream of Bourbon and water for Don and Planter's Punch for Cam and Elizabeth. Cam loosened up with the liquor and tried to draw as much blue blood out of his veins as he could, talking about his grandfather's bank and his family's False River plantation. He spun the bank's takeover as deliberate family strategy. And as for the plantation, what wasn't more than a dozen dysfunctional weekends as a kid and a few quail hunts as a teenager, Cam turned into long summers of hot nights on the sleeping porch and dusk-to-dawn game hunts on its twelve-hundred acre grounds. He didn't mention that his father pissed away the plantation's oil rights and that they had to sell the house for beans and the land for pennies. As Cam reeled on, Elizabeth's smiling approval made him hope he could find her a better man in himself than the one with the stolen shirt talking lies to impress people who only invited him to lunch because of his grandfather's good name and a few fabricated ambitions.

They finished the meal with bread pudding, bananas foster, cup custard and café brulot. Eventually they were the last table in the room that hadn't been reset for dinner, and the rum fire on the café brulot had long been out. Cam reached for his empty wallet and Don chided him for it.

"You can take Elizabeth out some time, how 'bout that?"

Cam smiled hopefully across the table at Elizabeth, but knowing full well that the Daltry name could only get him so far.

False River by Stinson Carter

They walked back to the Monteleone down Bienville, and Cam suggested a route along the side of the street opposite the oyster house. Don walked a few steps ahead of Cam and Elizabeth after some father-daughter cue Cam wasn't nearly quick enough to catch. As soon as Don was roughly out of earshot, Elizabeth spoke to Cam in a changed, confiding tone.

"How long are you gonna be down here?"

"I'm leaving tonight."

"Well tomorrow night my girlfriend's parents are throwing her 21st at their house in Audubon Place," she said.

"In Audubon Place?"

"Beautiful house, too, it's a shame you won't be here."

Munna and the banker talked about parties in that Old Line neighborhood, though all Cam had ever seen was the iron gates from the window of the St. Charles streetcar.

"Her father thinks he's Gatsby," said Elizabeth.

Cam laughed, but didn't know why.

"It's that 'Old New Orleans' scene. They name-drop Confederate generals and have more servants than Scarlet O'hara, but the Champagne's endless and the food's amazing."

Cam smiled like he was familiar with the scene.

"It'd be nice to have someone to laugh at it with," she said.

Cam nodded.

"Take my number in case you decide to stay," she said.

She took a small pad of paper and a ladies fountain pen from her purse, and glided through a few elegant shapes that Cam hoped to make sense of later on when he wasn't so distracted by the delicate hand writing them. Cam grazed that soft hand with his own rough one as she handed him her number. He slid it into his pocket like a bum would a thousand-dollar bill.

Just the feeling of her walking beside him was enough to bring everything back into focus. In a few hours, he'd go back to Shreveport and face whatever would need facing to get him on the up and up with the law again. Then he'd go back to Tech, where his grades had been good for the two semesters he'd managed to keep himself enrolled. As soon as he could, he'd take out another student loan, but this time put it all into studying whatever he'd have to study to make whatever he'd need to make to get and keep Elizabeth. He figured twenty-two was still young enough to turn this thing around and be someone else if he really tried. And a man worthy of Elizabeth, he decided, was what he'd be hell-bent on becoming.

They stood in the lobby of the Monteleone, stretching out their goodbyes beneath the grandfather clock. It was only then that Cam remembered his need for bus fare that sent him off to

False River by Stinson Carter

lunch in the first place. But whatever he would have to do to get it elsewhere would be well worth what he'd already gotten instead.

"Thank you, Don," said Cam, then he gave Don as firm and earnest a shake as he could.

"My pleasure, pal. Hope to see you soon."

Cam glanced eagerly at Elizabeth. "I'll call you."

"You better," she grinned.

She opened up her arms for a goodbye hug, and Cam pulled her gently to him and kissed her cheek. She swayed a little on her heels as she moved in closer, and he relished that crack in her perfection. It was hard for him to believe that her sweet blood could react to alcohol just like everybody else's. Don smiled at their lingering hug.

Cam was jolted out of his slow goodbye with a heavy slap on his shoulder. He turned around to see the laundress shaking her head with smugly pursed lips. Knowing what words were about to come out of her mouth, Cam tried to lead her away to have the unavoidable conversation in private, but he wasn't fast enough to beat her on the draw.

"That ain't yo' shirt!"

"What?" said Cam.

"You heard me!"

"I don't know what you're--"

"You stole that from mah lawndry!"

"You've got the wrong guy, ma'am," said Cam.

"Don't you be tellin' me I got the wrong guy, you got the wrong shirt. I saw you grab it off that hanger, don't you be callin' me a liah!"

"He did no such thing," said Don, stepping in. "And if you don't stop accusing him, I'm gonna get Richard Beaudry to settle this."

Cam could've assumed Don would have some high-level hotel manager's name up his sleeve. He knew guys like him had sleeves full of names.

"Ain't nothin' to do with Mr. Beaudry," she said.

"Well that's up to you, isn't it?" said Don.

"You tellin' me thass' yo shirt?" she asked Cam.

"Yes!" said Don, before Cam could answer.

"Whassa last name on that shirt, then?"

"Daltry," said Don.

"What room?" She asked.

"Three-fourteen," said Cam, nervously but without missing a beat.

False River by Stinson Carter

“Mr. Jeffries sent that shirt down from six-thirty-fo’ dis’ mawnin!”

“This is ridiculous!” said Don, storming off to the front desk with the laundress following a few steps behind him.

Elizabeth smiled at Cam to share a roll of eyes. He played along with her but kept his attention on Don’s argument with the front desk attendant and the laundress.

“He say he in three-fourteen,” said the laundress.

“Three-fourteen’s unoccupied,” said the desk attendant.

“The man is staying in your hotel!” said Don.

“We don’t have any Daltrys in the guest registry at all, sir.”

“Look...” Don charged back over to Cam. “I hate to even ask you this, but can you just show ‘em your room key so we can be done with this horsesh— this nonsense?”

The laundress marched back across the lobby towards them as Cam started fishing in his pockets for a key he’d have to pretend to have lost. His head dropped and his chest sunk as he felt Elizabeth’s number in his pocket. After a few moments of self-frisking, Cam shrugged.

“Must’ve fallen out at lunch,” he said.

“Mmm Hmm,” said the laundress, satisfied.

Don looked at Cam for a moment in confusion. Cam tried to smile back but his lips only got as far as a shaky up-turned line. Don put his arm around Elizabeth’s shoulders the way he did to both of them when Johnny stopped them on the street. Elizabeth was soon sold on her father’s certainty and backed away from Cam, as betrayal filled her pretty brown eyes.

Don put his other hand on the laundress’ arm. “Tell mister Jeffries to pick out a few shirts at Rubenstein Brothers and charge them to the Moorefield account. I’ll write him a letter of apology and leave it at the front desk.”

“Yes sir,” said the laundress, giddy with triumph.

Cam didn’t watch Don lead Elizabeth into the elevator. He walked back down the marble stairs, past the doorman and onto the street; with nothing but a belly full of butter, Mr. Jeffries’ shirt, and the phone number of a girl he would have married that afternoon.