

The First Two Pages: “Dead Even” by J.R. Sanders
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An Essay by J.R. Sanders

“Dead Even” is a short story featuring Nate Ross, the main character of my three previous novels, *Stardust Trail*, *Dead-Bang Fall*, and *Bring the Night*. He’s a decidedly old-school private eye operating in late 1930s Los Angeles (sorry, San Diego). Writing traditional detective fiction set in this period inevitably invites comparisons to Chandler and Hammett, and visions of a detective resembling Humphrey Bogart. I’ve tried throughout Nate’s adventures to set him apart by making his white knight’s armor a bit more tarnished than Marlowe’s without letting him slump to the alley cat morals of Sam Spade and by giving him more sense of humor than either. And if he’s not as cool as Bogart, he’s at least taller.

The idea for “Dead Even” came from newspaper accounts from the ’30s of an unusual criminal ring operating not in California, but Philadelphia (to avoid spoilers I won’t say more than that). It begins with Nate finding himself out of his element at a honkytonk party co-hosted by his friend Dusty, a bit player in Westerns as well as a former Texas lawman and retired rodeo rider. Nate’s less than impressed with Cassie, the new girlfriend of Dusty’s business partner Pooter, another day-playing cowpoke.

I didn't think much of Pooter's girl. I met her at the Buscadero, the bar my pal Dusty Vanner ran with his old buddy Pooter. It was a watering hole for B-movie Hollywood cowboys, mostly day-playing extras which was what Dusty and Pooter were when they weren't tending bar.

The Buscadero really wasn't my style, but Dusty had invited me to a little shindig they were having to celebrate their sixth month in business. And that was where Pooter introduced me to his "little gal." The name was Cassie Plumm. He'd met her on a film set, where she had been a fellow extra. Even before he introduced us, I'd noticed her—she was a girl you'd notice—but I'd thought she was just one of the usual chippies you'd find in any Hollywood bar. She'd made the rounds, dancing and flirting with every cowboy in the joint, and it was stacked ceiling high with them. She'd pranced and giggled and batted her eyes all evening. She was the kind of girl who was cute and knew it, and who was determined that before the night was out every man in the place would know it, too.

His disdain for her is coupled with suspicion:

Not that Pooter was a bad looking fellow, if a fair bit older than the girl. But I knew he had one other attraction that might draw women of a certain type. Unlike the usual day-playing cowboy, living hand-to-mouth, Pooter was rich. He was the only son of a family that owned half the oil wells in north Texas.

Nate's no more impressed when Cassie drops by his office the next day with a sketchy story and a job offer.

After the usual, meaningless pleasantries Cassie came right to the point.

"I need your help, Mr. Ross."

"You might as well call me Nate, since Pooter's a...well, a friend of a friend."

"Nate, then." I noticed she'd winced at the name "Pooter".

"And how can I help you?"

"First of all, Gerald," she said, Gerald being Pooter's given name, "mustn't know I've engaged you, or even that we've spoken."

"Engaged me to do what?"

“There’s a man. A man from my past. He’s menacing me, and I want him to stop. But Gerald can’t know.”

“A former boyfriend?”

“Yes.” There’d been just enough shift in her eyes and hesitation in her response to make me doubt her answer. But I nodded as if I bought it.

“I see. And Poot – Gerald – can’t know because you don’t want him to know about the menacing, or about the man?”

She didn’t like the question much. “Both,” she said through pursed lips.

The opening reintroduces Nate (and Dusty) to previous readers of his adventures and sketches enough of his character hopefully to engage first-time readers. It also tinkers with the time-honored trope of the private eye nursing bourbon in his office when a good-looking dame with a problem slinks through his door and hooks him with a wink and a smile. Though Nate acknowledges Cassie’s charms, he dislikes and distrusts her, even more so after she hints at what she’s hoping to hire him for.

“What exactly is it you’d like me to do?”

“Why, get rid of Thane,” she said with a look and in a tone that said I might be the king of all idiots.

“Get rid of him how?”

She winked. “That’s up to you.” With that she went into the purse again and pulled out a huge roll of bills. She peeled off a few and looked up at me. “Is two thousand enough?”

Though he doubts her story, he’s curious enough to grudgingly accept her offer (at a much-reduced price) after making it clear to her he’s not *that* kind of p.i.

The remaining story follows Nate's hunt for the mysterious Thane Decker, along the way enlisting the help of a hotel detective pal/former coworker, his L.A.P. D. frenemy Captain Queenan, and his buddy Dusty.

Although overall the story's a serious crime tale, I worked to keep the tone reasonably light and inject a fair amount of humor, especially in Nate's interactions with Dusty and Queenan. This was to stay consistent with their appearances in the novels, in which both characters generally give Nate an equal share of help and headaches.

These opening pages launch Nate on a twisting seriocomic course in which each step he takes leads him along a slightly different crooked path toward discovering the truth about Cassie. And when he does, it becomes a race to set things right before it's too late.

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Award-winning author J.R. Sanders is a native Midwesterner and longtime denizen of the L.A. suburbs. His first Nate Ross novel, *Stardust Trail*—a detective story set among the B-Western film productions of 1930s Hollywood—was a 2021 Spur Award Finalist (Best Historical Novel), and 2021 Silver Falchion Award Finalist (Best Investigator). *Dead-Bang Fall*, the second Nate Ross novel, is currently a 2023 Shamus Award finalist for Best Original P.I. Paperback. The third in the series, *Bring the Night*, was released in April 2023 by Level Best Books/Historia.