

Tumbleweed

This town attracted a putrid sort of human being. The sort that would sooner speak with bullets rather than words. Some fateful soul struck gold just in the middle of Deadwood in the middle of the decade, and sure enough, it would sound off the mating call that brought them all here. Matthias Sanderson despised that lot with every fiber of his being, along with anyone who would dare trespass upon the sort of serenity he had come to cherish. This unsuspecting town had boomed so suddenly, so many crowds seeking untold riches, all of it was about to suffocate him. For even the slightest whiff of air, the only option was to struggle. Sanderson may not have thought of himself as the violent sort, but when the moment came, he would fight to his teeth and leave the other guy with his missing.

The mustachioed sheriff, Seth Bullock had given Sanderson a most peculiar nickname from the way he fights. “Tumbleweed, sir?” Sanderson asked. “You ever notice whenever you crash one of ‘em rotten critters over, they up an’ bounce like tumbleweeds.” Bullock replied. “Kiddin’ aside Matthias, my crowbar hotel would be a lot less welcomin’ without ya’ my boy.” There was a sincerity behind the proud laugh of the tall lawman. Under the employ of the sheriff, Sanderson felt more honored than he ever thought he was worthy of, and to think it came from the most unusual suspect. Despite his notoriously intimidating presence, Bullock was hospitable when taking office amidst more trying times than ever. The young man felt respected by Bullock, more than anyone other than his own family, and yet he felt so out of his element. That nickname, “Tumbleweed.” Was this a reputation that he wanted? In this lawless sea that West America had been drowning in, the young man swam to the one vessel he could tell would persevere any tide in Seth Bullock’s. It was the rational thing to do, Sanderson found a means by which to fend off any sort of danger with guidance from him. He

thought of Bullock's infamously sharp glare that his grey eyes could cut through anyone with. Whether he was there for convenience, for desire, or for reputation, the young man failed to find answers.

A night shift in jail. Cell to cell, Sanderson would kick the center bar with the spur on the back of his left boot. By doing this each captive would either leave their bed and stand up straight, or those already standing would face toward the bars. The cell on the far end's captive took a while before he could get out of his bed, and wobbled around like he was a wind chime in the middle of a twister. This double-chinned simpleton had thick and unkempt chestnut hair atop his head, a small and sandy mustache strangling his upper lip, and eyes that found ways to cross like blades no matter his condition. "Been 'ere seven hours, and you still aint over yourself, eh Johnny boy." Sanderson mocked. "Deputy, you know that's not my name!" Jack McCall replied. "If I was a bettin' man, I'd just wager e'ery damn coin I got on me that you aint even drunk anymore, McCall."

McCall scowled at him and held onto the bars to keep himself on his feet. "Can you blame a man for celebratin' a little hard after comin' out unscathed in your town's kangaroo court?" Sanderson removed McCall's hands from the bars with a feint punch attempt. The oafish man stumbled backward and sat himself down like a toddler during story time when Sanderson told McCall his own. "Let's not bother pretending that you're Deadwood's Cats-Paw all of a sudden, you know as well as I that you shot Wild Bill from behind after he beat you hand after hand, losing so much in fact, that you'd never cover your losses." McCall rose to his feet and pointed his index finger, directing every ounce of venom his teeth had toward Sanderson with his words. "Don't bother talkin' 'bout that damn game! Lawman or not, he had no 'tegrity. You wanna know what I saw, when I went back to Nuttal & Mann's to rematch him? Wild Bill Hickok, with his back facing the door, had a hand full of Aces and Eights! You expect me to believe that was the luck o' the draw?"

“You played drunk, and he played you like a drunk, it’s as simple as that. Besides, didn’t he kill your brother?” Sanderson recalled.

“...and I would have done it again if I had the chance.” McCall was speaking with much less fire than he had before. No longer was he making eye contact, and his mood seemed to have mellowed itself out. It was as if he completely forgot his whole reason for being angry over the discussion he and Sanderson were having. “If by some chance you did do it again, Jack... would you even enjoy it?” Sanderson pondered. “I hate drawin’ my piece just fo’ the hell of it, but if there’s permission to be proud o’ somethin’ then count me in.” McCall replied. Sanderson grinned and let out a warm chuckle. He leaned his back against the bars, knowing that the cell posed no proper danger with the miserable Jack McCall occupying it. “Should it ever be our misfortune to kill a man ... we would simply ask that our trial may take place in some of the mining camps of these hills.”

Sanderson recited. McCall’s eyebrow raised into the shape of an untied lasso, his mind likely racing to find an answer to his confusion. “Is that why my trial had a miner’s court instead of a proper legislature?” McCall asked. “Them right there was outta the Black Hills Pioneer’s front page not even a day after the verdict,” Sanderson responded.

McCall could only sigh. “Before you cuffed me, deputy, I met a guy. His name was California Joe, he’s one o’ them miners that court had. He suggested that this place has bad air, and frankly my health might just agree with ‘im.” Sanderson turned to look him in the eye. “Come mornin’ are you movin’ on outta ‘ere then?” McCall finally met his gaze again. “I reckon so, but somethin’ tells me you aint gonna hear the last o’ me!” The oaf boasted.

In the weeks since he last spoke to McCall, Deadwood became awfully quiet. Sanderson welcomed the growing bubble of calm, and yet while it was lasting well beyond expectations, he remained on edge. All of it felt thin enough for even the most

mundane incident to completely pop it, but little could he have suspected that the moment that would do so would be far beyond mundane. A large mug of the softest drink Nuttal and Mann's serves occupied the space between Matthias Sanderson's fingers, the chill numbing the pain from cuts between his knuckles. The saloon was remarkably deserted, as Sanderson had only three others in his company. Miner, Nicky Driscoll of the same prosecution that sought to seal Jack McCall's fate, George Ayres, one of Deadwood's upstart merchants, and Reverend Henry Weston Smith, enjoying their company before his departure to Crook City, where he shall preach. "I reckon it is past time that I depart." He announced. "Shucks Rev'rand, you aint gotta be so feeze 'bout leavin' all o' us behind!" Ayres protested. "You aint even got your fill o' Nuttal an' Mann's firewater. Heck, if anythin' you seem like you's sick o' us." Driscoll teased.

The Reverend sighed with his eyes shut and his smile small. The man of God was still so new to the people of Deadwood, and yet not soul around disliked him in the least. With every sermon he would deliver each Sunday morning, and every prayer he would lead, Deadwood's people felt some semblance of reattachment to the dignified world for the first time since the place had struck gold. Sanderson revered the man for that, and unlike Ayres and Driscoll he would not object to Henry Weston Smith's desire to embark upon his new journey that awaited him, but even so, there was one lingering thought he could not help but voice. Just as Smith opened the door, Sanderson set his beverage down, stood up, and gave his concerns to an audience. "Good man, if you must depart, I must insist you leave armed. Them Indian lot gettin' real possessive over the land beyond those mines that head outta town." The holy man as his kempt hair glowed under the moonlight, chuckled and turned to address all three of the saloon's patrons. "The Bible is my protection, and not once have I been failed." The door closed, and he would vanish into the midnight abyss, the angelic light that had bathed him once, was there no more.

"Say, Tumbleweed... when did you... get so... so... flat?" Driscoll had been

through five glasses at this point. To Sanderson, Driscoll's thin body and bald head transformed into the spitting image of Jack McCall the last night he spent in Deadwood. "Sheriff seriously don't know when to shut his trap 'bout me." Sanderson bemoaned this unwelcome nickname gaining more and more popularity amongst the rest of Deadwood. With the barkeep leaving everyone to their own devices this late at night, Driscoll had no way to stop himself. Sanderson could not help but remark on what had been said to him. "Flat, Nicky? What about yourself? You, sir, are as full as a tick." Driscoll turned away from the bar and slowly made his way to Sanderson. With the amount of dust covering his clothes, it took everything Sanderson had not to cough it back into Driscoll's face. "You is one flat lil' varmint, Sandy boy! You is drinkin' a small man's drink, yet you is so big! The Rev'rand I get, but you? Bullock must call you that... 'cause... because o' your delicate little pride... bein' so... delicate." Driscoll's mind seemed to have passed the point of comprehension. He leaned closer to the standing-still Sanderson and shoved his blackened finger into his face. "You know... I'm beginnin' to think that you, Tumbleweed, are just a miserable scat chuckin' mo-"

Driscoll's words were silenced after his body bounced off the ground like he was a tumbleweed in the wind. Sanderson's outstretched hand forming a tight fist delivered a punch to the center of the miner's nose. He had not thrown that out of any animosity to the man, but it was better to silence him before he had the chance to say something unnecessary. "You can thank me fo' that when you wake up." Sanderson remarked. Ayres, leaving his own chair, hoisted the unconscious Driscoll over his back. His mustache was dry, as he like the Reverend, was only at Nuttal and Mann's for the company. Removing an unconscious patron whose goatee was dripping wet from his consumption of their hardest brew was the least he could do. "I can take him home from 'ere, but if it aint too much t' ask, Matthias... I do got somethin' I'd like you to do fo' me." The Merchant requested. "Please see the Reverend out of town while there's still time. You said yourself them lands he goin' through are treacherous, and with the miners not working the night shift, he aint got nothin' to keep 'imself safe with. If you go on horseback, you'll be sure to catch up with 'im." This favor came from a place of concern that was as natural for the young merchant as breathing. Ayres had always thought well of the people of Deadwood. Though he was younger than Sanderson, the magnitude of how proudly he lived his life was incomparable to anyone else in town. With a nod, he spoke to send him and the miner off. "You can count on me, George."

The trot of hooves over a rock-lain path. It was the lone sound alongside Matthias Sanderson's midnight ride, and to his ears, it may as well have been silence when compared to the reverberations that his heart spread throughout his body. He failed to determine the cause, but there was an awful feeling that just would not leave him alone. Finally arriving by the mines Sanderson dismounted from his steed. Just splayed out over the path heading outwards was an odd shape. Walking closer, it became all too clear

what this was. Sanderson lowered to a knee and turned over the lifeless body of Reverend Henry Weston Smith. Eyes shut, hair unkempt, clothes muddied, and still he had his Bible. This was no robbery, it was murder. The fear that the young deputy had been unable to shake off, had taken the shape of panic instead. The horror of seeing what had been done to this man, was magnified by something that had stolen his attention.

Just beyond the sight of the body, Sanderson could hear footsteps take form. A tall figure wearing a black poncho and a hooded sash covering his face. He had to have stood well over six feet and had at least five inches over Sanderson in height. Leaving his crouch, Sanderson drew his six shooter and aimed it at the stranger, his finger off trigger, and thumb pulling the hammer back. "Explain yourself! Who're you? Did you do this to the Reverend?" Just as he was ready to fire off a warning shot, a tight ring of rope snared Sanderson's wrist, and a hard tug dragged him across the ground and the firearm away from his hand. "I aint come 'ere for Matthias Sanderson, the gunslinger.

No, I want

Tumbleweed. You see that body? You want answers? I've got one condition fo' you. You beat me an' I'll answer all o' your questions." Pulling Sanderson to his feet and seizing his wrist, the challenger removed his lasso. Entering his guard, Sanderson made a declaration to this foe of his. "You's in for it now, enemy."

The first punch was Sanderson's to throw, but the only impact was with the poncho as it followed an evading body. The enemy's left leg collided with the spur on Sanderson's back leg, the metal piece now separated from his attire. The force of this blow once again sent Sanderson's back to the ground, and he would have merged with it had he not evaded the attacker's right boot on the ensuing strike. Rolling back to his feet, Sanderson changed his approach on the fly, reaching out and grabbing the poncho with

both hands, pulling it forward to remove the distance between them. As he did this however, his guard was low enough for the man in black to land a punch of his own that

drew blood out of Sanderson's nose upon its heavy landing.

Sanderson wiped the blood away and lunged forward with another attack, seizing the man's shoulders, but held back with a pair of thick gloves tightened around his own. The struggle ensued with both men holding on tightly, writhing around, moving their feet forward and backward, eager to break free and continue their assault. Sanderson's arms were inside of the struggle, thus an opportunity emerged before him through the flames in his eyes. He let go of the man in black's shoulders and struck both of his arms, breaking free of the assailant's vice.

Rearing back with every bit of power he could put into his right arm, Sanderson envisioned the gun he had released and channeled what havoc could be wreaked with a pull of the trigger, becoming not the bullet within its chamber, but the spark to propel it forward. Never in his life had he thrown a punch as hard as this one, and from the sound it made on impact, one could be forgiven for believing that it was indeed the sound of gunfire. Never had anyone he had hit even half as hard stood as still as this man in black had. Through the hooded sash, his eyes appeared the same way a gawking audience would at a circus' clown show. What these eyes saw before them was a joke too hysterical to even try laughing at. These eyes in all of this darkness were easier to see than a tree in a cornfield, and easier still when the head holding these eyes collided with Sanderson's skull. Falling to the ground, the impact had his body bouncing like tumbleweed.

"I must've had the wrong idea 'bout you, boy. You're no challenge at all!" These words and the subsequent pain from a kick to Sanderson's lungs kept him from pursuing the mysterious foe. He began his slow walk away from Sanderson, away from the mines, away from Deadwood, and into the abyss of the woods outside. Sanderson rolled the dice and came up with snake eyes. He had only come this far to see the Reverend off safely

but instead arrived at the sight of his corpse, and the one man who had any answers whatsoever as to what happened defeated him so utterly and escaped. He had come for “Tumbleweed” and instead this suspect had created “Tumbleweed.” This stronger man had given Matthias Sanderson much more than pain, now the young cowboy had an appetite, a hunger to earn this reputation he had been growing. No matter what it takes, this tumbleweed refused to bounce again.