

Calamity Djinn

Ken Rand

"Marry me, or I'll shoot."

Calamity Djinn stood firm as a cottonwood, back to the just-risen sun, knee-high buckskin moccasins spread in a shooter's stance in the tall meadow grass. She aimed her Sharps, as long as she was tall, at Butch Parker, who stood across the campfire from her. Seconds before, he'd been asleep. He was awake now, his eyes riveted on the weapon aimed at him. At and up—Butch stood a good two feet taller than Calamity.

Pungent gunpowder overwhelmed the meadow's sage perfume. A covey of quail flushed in the tall grass close by, but the woman didn't flinch.

Butch could have reached out, if he'd wanted to, and stuck his finger in the muzzle, but he didn't. Nobody messed with a loaded Sharps. Or with the trapper woman some folks called Calamity Djinn. Some folks called her "Calamity" because wherever she went, calamity followed. Some folks said she was a witch, or something like it; that's where the "Djinn" came from.

Nobody messed with her, not even Butch Parker, who was big enough to be called "Porker" behind his back by his fellow trappers, and big enough that seldom happened.

Butch flicked his eyes away from the Sharps and looked around the grassy meadow where they stood. He looked at the big dead cottonwood behind them, at the aspen and pine-covered rolling hills beyond the meadow, and the jagged spikes of the Wind River Mountains on the eastern horizon over the woman's shoulder. It looked to Calamity as if he was scouting for a griz or a Shoshone war party or something else to change the subject. But she didn't flinch.

She'd planned the ambush well. No bear for miles and the nearest Indians she'd tracked was a hunting party moving away and north, upvalley.

"Now, Calamity," Butch said, voice molasses smooth, "that Sharps packs a kick, you know."

"Reckon I do."

"And you don't want to hurt yourself."

"Reckon I don't."

"So, if you'll just sort of—"

Butch lowered one big paw to gesture, but being nervous facing the Sharps, he did it too fast and the motion spooked Calamity, who gasped, a tad nervous too—the thought of marriage and all, at last—and took half a step back. She caught her heel on a loose rock and stumbled. The Sharps discharged with a roar, knocking her to the ground in a gunpowder-smoke cloud.

The bullet tore Butch's coonskin hat off. The slug, the size of a cigar stub, careened off a snag hanging from the cottonwood behind Butch.

The limb, as big around as Butch's thigh, fell straight down on him from twenty feet up, butt first, hit him on the head like a well-swung war club. Knocked him out cold.

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Calamity tore up the petticoat she'd got a few days before from a Mormon pushcart company that had been led astray—too far north—by a drunken so-called guide named Big Nose Jack. Calamity beat the tar out of Jack, sent him on his way mostly still alive, and redirected the company back onto the Lander Cutoff, where they were supposed to be. In reward, one of the three women in the company—the one as tiny as Calamity—traded her, in secret, the petticoat for a pint of whiskey.

Calamity wanted the lacy white undergarment for her wedding night. Which she hoped to enjoy right soon with her beloved Butch.

Truth be told, she envied those Mormon women. Nine kids, she'd counted, among them. And one woman heavy with number ten.

She'd have children of her own, too—soon—by God, and by Butch Parker.

As soon as he regained consciousness.

Now the petticoat was tattered, bloody. Its cedarwood scent had been lost. She used it to staunch the blood gushing from Butch's head and bandage the wound. The blood stopped by noon, and he'd rested until sundown, and beyond, slipping in and out of consciousness.

He moaned a lot and cussed some when he woke up, but Calamity figured he'd live.

She gave him whiskey—from *his* parfleche, not hers—when his bellyaching got too loud. By midnight, he'd quieted down some but not much, so Calamity concocted a poultice made from boiled Jimsonweed she found near the creek that bordered the meadow.

She stayed up through the night, smoking her corncob pipe, stoking the fire, tossing rocks at the occasional nosy coyote, and swearing to God and the goddam Great Spirit that if Butch was still alive come morning, she was going to kill him for scaring her so.

"I almost blew your head off, you damn fool," she said. "Can't hardly marry me a corpse, now can I, huh?"

Butch snorted under the buffalo robe Calamity had tossed over him to help keep out the chill. She had hoped they'd *both* be under that robe this very night, snuggled together, enjoying the bonds of holy matrimony, but—

Preacher Avery Morgan ministered to the good folk of Three Pines, white and Indian, a half days hike southwest, over on the west bank of the Green where they had a ferry. Calamity could have been Mrs. Parker by now, but no.

Butch snorted loud and Calamity knelt at his side. "What?" she said.

"I don't feel so good," he said.

"There, there." Calamity stroked Butch's stringy beard with her tiny fingers, remembering her mother gently touching her cheek the same way *that* long ago, back in Missouri when she'd come down with the chicken pox. "There, there," her mother had said. Just like Calamity did now.

Back then, Calamity had no idea what "There, there," meant, but it worked. It didn't work now.

Butch's eyes popped wide, wild sparks in the whites reflected from the campfire light, as he raised up on his shoulders, stout arms twitching, spastic.

"What, Butch? What?"

Butch sighed, relaxed, and closed his eyes.

And died.

It took Calamity a few minutes to get her mind around Butch's new condition. The poultice hadn't helped. Her tender ministrations hadn't helped. "There, there," hadn't helped either.

"Well goddam you, Butch Parker, anyways."

Crickets churred, and a coyote howled.

The night smelled of burnt sagewood, old blood, and tobacco. And Butch.

A comet passed among the stars.

Nobody saw Calamity Djinn cry. She cried till dawn.

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The creekbank ground a hundred yards away afforded better digging, so Calamity decided to bury Butch there. She dug with her hatchet, and her toad sticker, and a good pole she found, and with her fingers. She dug without let up, wanting to be sure Butch was deep enough that no goddam coyote dug him up. She dug as the sun rose above the Winds, sweat soaking her buckskins, making her stink and itch.

Then she rolled Butch's huge corpse onto a makeshift travois—he was still wrapped in her buffalo robe—and tied it down with rawhide rope. She dragged the contraption across the grassy meadow to the grave.

Beside the hole, she caught her breath before speaking. "I ain't said a prayer in thirty—I mean *twenty-nine*—years. Sorry, Lord. Been too busy, I reckon, to pay you no social calls." She sniffled, and blew her nose on her sleeve.

"But I expect you know all that, about me, about the beaver trade going to the dogs in these parts—hell, fifteen years ago, and more—about me wanting to settle, have kids. About this here miserable, no good, ornery, son-of-a-bitch—"

She anchored fists on narrow hips and addressed the Winds, as if God lived there, and could hear her from where she stood a good four days west.

"Well, never mind. This here's Butch Parker, and maybe he never amounted to much—I guess *you* know—but I loved him anyway. I—I—"

She burst out crying again.

Wiping away tears, she undid the ropes that secured the robe-clad corpse to the travois, and heaved Butch toward his grave.

The robe slipped from her sweaty hands, and Butch fell part way out, onto his back, feet and legs in the grave.

Cold dead eyes looked up at Calamity.

I shut them eyes, didn't I?

That did it.

"I can't hardly marry me no corpse, now can I, huh?" She'd said that.

She'd tried a Jimsonweed poultice and "There, there." Neither answered, but she had more tricks in her possibles sack.

* * * *

Twenty years before, Calamity was named Sarah Jane Foster. Indians killed her folks the same summer she met Bob Beaumont, a handsome young fellow, son of a nearby farmer. An adventurer, Bob was. When Sarah Jane lost her folks, Bob was about to head out West, to see some land, and trap beaver in the Shining Mountains. Bereft of family, in love with Bob, Sarah joined him.

Bob fell off his horse en route and broke his fool neck. Sarah, with nowhere else to go and nothing else to do, buried him and moved on. She joined up with old Jim Bridger's outfit. When she told him her story, she got dubbed "Calamity" on the spot.

Bridger told her. "Nobody treks these here mountains without knowing how to do for their owndamnselves." With that, he'd taught her to fish, shoot, skin, fight, smoke, patch clothes and wounds, cook, and fix a fair rosehip tea.

After he taught her all he knew, he loaned her to his friend Shot in the Hip, a Shoshone medicine man. "Ol' Shotsie'll give you the lowdown on medicine manning, stuff even I don't know. Y'ever need to set your own leg, or take out a bullet or an arrow, you'll remember your lessons."

Calamity learned how to use and abuse more than three hundred herbs, roots, flowers, leaves, barks, pollens, sap, seeds, stems, stalks, and grasses. She learned how to use bear fat and wild onion to make a salve for burns, how to use badger gall and flax seed to brew a tea to cure headaches, how to use dried moss and coyote shit to staunch a wound. She learned how to cure every ailment, harm, malady, and complaint known to man, Indian, and horse.

"What else is there?" Calamity had asked Shot in the Hip when her training was near done. It had taken up the latter half of the winter and early spring her first year west of the Missouri. She was smart, a quick learner.

The old Indian, as tiny as Calamity, frowned, adding wrinkles to his leathery face. "You know everything Indians know, and everything the French and Americans know. You're a good doctor. What else is there to know?"

"How to raise the dead?"

At the time, Calamity had thought she was joking.

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The batwing doors of the Lucky Nickel Saloon, on Laramie's muddy Second Avenue, swung open, and a woman stepped inside. She stood there, firm as an old cottonwood. She wore buckskins, knee-high moccasins spread in a shooter's stance. Besides the old-fashioned garb, like the old-time trappers used to wear before the beaver trade petered out thirty years gone and more, the woman toted an ancient Sharps, as long as she was tall.

The doors swung shut behind her, squeaking. It was an hour before noon, and the saloon was empty, except for Mick, the Irish bartender, and Casper, the one-eyed ex-gunfighter, who wasn't very drunk yet, and Banky, but he was passed out under a table. Jack Thatcher hadn't arrived yet.

The woman peered around, squinty-eyed, adjusting to the dim interior.

"Lord a'mighty," Mick whispered, awe cracking his deep bass voice. His eyes bugged, and his big hands trembled. It took a lot to rile Mick, who seldom neither smiled nor frowned, even in a fight.

"What?" Casper said. He didn't turn around to see who'd come in. Couldn't see worth diddly anyway.

Mick nodded toward the door. "Know who that is?" Sweat speckled his broad forehead.

Casper turned at last. He squinted. "Reckon I don't."

"Daughter of Butch Parker and Calamity Djinn."

Casper turned back to Mick, his thin brows raised in inquiry. "What?" he said, a touch worried-sounding.

"You know the story, don't you?" Mick whispered.

The woman stalked toward them across the sawdust floor.

"Aw, that's just a fairy tale," Casper said, voice wavering, "made up to scare children and—"

"Pardon me, barkeep." The woman propped the Sharps, muzzle up, against the bar.

"Yes'm?" Mick's voice cracked again.

"I just got into town," she said, "and I'm looking for me a husband."

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