

Finalist, Fiction

## **Caliente**

by Lisbeth Gelatt

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Damon slipped on the silicone socks, one over each leg, being careful there were no folds or buckles of the thick milky tubes. Next came the prostheses, one for each leg. Those were strapped on, a little extra security. He stifled a desire for a more natural-looking lower leg, at least at the ankle. These metal joints, coverless, worked very well, but they looked like hell. People stared. Once again he wondered if a cardboard tube, covered with a simple gym sock, would work as camouflage, or get in the way. One shoulder shrug later, the thought was forgotten.

Keys were stowed in the side pocket of a pair of long cargo shorts. White tee shirt, shrugged on, and bandana tied across the forehead lent attitude to the outfit. Long hair swept into a simple black braid that hung to his shoulder blades. Wallet, riding gloves, leather jacket, boom. Damon was ready to roll. He palmed his helmet like a basketball as he passed the hall table.

This morning she kicked easily to life, as if waiting for him. One of his bike brothers'd installed an electric shift kit for him, and a keyed start, as a coming home present. No contest, the best gift ever. Now his sleek, stretch of a Hog, finest thing ever constructed in York, Pa, made him as mobile as anyone else out there on the road. More mobile, even, than most drivers with their steel cages keeping them safe. There was no such thing as safe, only the illusion. Nobody had a better handle on that. Damon grinned as she turned over easy, a sweet rumble that was his idea of heaven.

He eased her toward the underpass, the loop up onto the highway. Then he was sailing. *I am coming for you*, popped in his mind as he whipped his girl around the belching, apple green ford in front of him. *Too bad you drive that P.O.S.* he sneered at the rust as he sailed by.

Nearing the Marina district, he eased off the highway and down to surface streets, digging the bright facades of the older buildings. Lime, peacock blue, salmon, fuchsia, sunny

yellow. The colors were a distraction. He reluctantly tore his eyes from the scenery and concentrated on the tricky stop-n-go that was Little Havana.

Even though it was too damned hot, he wore his colors proudly. Lotta guys thought they were tougher, him being a crip. They'd think twice before messing with his crew. It stuck in his throat, that he needed that invisibackup. But a man had to do what he had to do, with his lower legs laying by the side of the road somewhere outside of Basrah. Freakin IED. But one thing always stood out to him: If he thought he was badass before, he'd been a stupid pup compared to now. Now he knew the real cost of being tough. He'd paid it. Pound of flesh and all. If he could do anything about it, though, he'd be damned. *A Purple Heart is not an honor, he thought, it's a frigging billboard that I'm too damn dumb to lay down and die.*

Damon sighed, and pulled into the tiny fenced lot he leased from the restaurant supply store. It was owned by a family friend. The truck was under lock, key and surveillance. He bought everything from them. All the raw ingredients that went into his business, a food truck called DEMON FRIES. His cousin Mario whipped out his tagging equipment to decorate the truck old-school, complete with a giant caricature of Damon himself. He admired the subtle brick-wall background, covered with graffiti. He'd been careful not to include gang signs anywhere on the truck. The result was a little chi-chi, but it attracted attention, so that was cool. Along with the black menu board, which required neon markers to really pop, the whole thing had set him back maybe seventy thou with the modifications for retrofit handicap driving. Another hundred thou to account for his business model, and Damon figured he'd be in hock for eternity. He'd been wrong. Here we were, six years later and paid in full. Miracles, meet the beholder.

As usual, Marci wheeled in five minutes late, parked her antique Schwinn next to the chain link, and rigged a complicated weave with her cable lock to make it unattractive to thieves. Damon never bothered with that. If they wanted to steal his girl, first they'd need to figure her out. She was a bike, yeah, but she was one complicated lady.

Together, Damon and Marci loaded the day's produce, unplugged the electric from the socket, fired up the battery-op business that kept everything chill, and refilled the hot sauce

squirt bottles that were a large part of their shtick. Marci hopped out to close the gate behind them, raced to the curb to pretend she was hitch hiking a ride as he rolled.

Damon pulled onto the road, gaudy truck a slow-rolling clash against the colorful buildings. First stop was near the office buildings in downtown. The Wednesday lunch crowd always made a line wrapping around a city block. Parking break, level jacks, menu board stashed outside, permits on display, and Damon's Demon Fries was in business.

It got warm, so Marci stopped cutting potatoes. She peeled out of her tee to display a neon string bikini top, though her lower half stayed covered in thin black nylon track pants. She always rolled the waistband down to barely cover the top of her panties. A glittering circle of rhinestones clipped her navel, with a silver handcuff charm. Marci relied on tips to keep her son in Catholic School. The boy was brilliant, and sex sells.

Today's belly charm matched the dual pairs dangling from her ears. Her short, heavily highlighted hair was swept back in a punishingly tight scrape with a duo of silver bands, then left to fluff wildly behind her. Nobody rocked the health code quite like Marci.

After a short stint downtown for the lunch crowd, Damon made a short stop back at the base, to re-load supplies. Then Damon and Marci were off to the beach. Damon pulled the truck up to the beachfront lot, flashed his permit to the attendant, and rolled over to his usual spot, where he'd left his adaptor on the electric outlet for the last six years. His usual spot was occupied.

The evening sauciers, Beth and Amanda, two coeds who earned tuition-sustaining tips for their coordinated acrobatics with the sauce bottles, were arguing with a woman wearing a cropped, fiery orange T-shirt that matched the logo on the interloper's truck: Angel's Wings. Damon pulled his truck parallel to the interloper, and let it idle while he rolled down the window. "Ladies, good evening. I think we have an issue here. This is my usual spot."

The busty blond in the orange T-shirt, with Angel Wings drawn on the back, stomped her feet over to his cab. Her lip-sticked mouth opened wide for a deep breath, and then she shouted at Damon. "Let me tell you something, I don't appreciate you sending your girls over here to harass me. I am following the rules for this beach, and its lots. Just because you got

here late today isn't my fault. You snooze, you lose, bubba. We can arrive anytime we want, and I been here for hours."

Damon sighed. She wasn't wrong, but she also wasn't following the friendly agreement he'd formed with other food vendors along the strip. They always gave themselves plenty of room between trucks, to eliminate competition, and they each had their usual spots. "No problem, I can park someplace else, but I'm afraid you are using my electrical adapter. You see, I've been in this spot for six years. It was easier for me to leave the adapter attached."

"That piece of junk? Are you kidding me? It don't look up to code to me. I couldn't risk the problems it would cause me if it didn't work. I got me a new one. And, I'll take it with me when I go. Here, take it." The woman stomped over to the electrical box sitting on the edge of the tarmac, bent over, and picked up the adapter. She strutted back, slapped it into Beth's waiting hands. The left prong was bent at a right angle. The adapter was ruined.

Damon sighed. Without some kind of backup plan, the best he could do was to choose the spot in the opposite corner of the lot. It wasn't the best spot available, set back from the waterline and farther from the community walkway. He parked right next to the bulletin board showcasing the Miami Caliente competition, which he'd once won. This year, he had a brilliant entry, and couldn't wait to see how it did in the competition.

Damon set up a station for Beth and Amanda in the sand, playing their favorite high-energy music to drum up a crowd. The girls tossed the Hellfire sauce like a hot potato, clapping and twirling to the music. As always, the crowd grew, and Damon raced to finish enough prep work to cover the time lost arguing with the woman from Angel's Wings. At ten after four, he dropped the first basket of fries into the oil for their first hot bath. This made them easier to prepare quickly later on.

Marci raced to the hardware store three blocks away, and returned in a few minutes with a new adapter. Within the hour, Demon's Fries was in business. The hungry crowd grew as Beth and Amanda performed for every order of Hellfire fries. A drive-by from his motorcycle club brought envious looks from the men on the beach, as they arrayed their bikes in a half circle around the truck. Amanda and Beth worked their routine extra hard, for the generous

tips Damon's friends would give. He gave Gunny a hard look, finding the older gent ogling Amanda's assets. His sauciers were off limits.

At 7:30, as his bike club was finishing up, the local news channel stopped for some background footage on a beachfront nightlife story. The anchor delighted Damon with a prime spot on the Ten o'clock news and a short interview about the Miami Caliente competition. As he kicked back with a brew later that evening, he had to chuckle. He looked decent enough, interviewed through the order window of his truck. The ladies looked great with their hot sauce routine for local color. There was even a bigmouth blonde in the background, arms crossed, angry scowl partially hidden by her bleached hair.

The next afternoon, the Angel's Wings truck was parked in the opposite corner of the lot. Damon chuckled to himself as he pulled into his usual spot. Marci plugged in the new adapter. Beth and Amanda were in good spirits, and the evening raced past. At 6:30 he took a break to enjoy his special empanadas. Biting into the fried pastry, he glanced out the window to see the frowsy blonde from Angel's Wings gesturing wildly in his direction from in front of her truck. Miami-Dade's finest on foot patrol listened patiently to her rant before strolling over to talk to Damon, sitting sideways in the driver's seat.

"Hey, Paul." Damon was already reaching back for the large soda Marci automatically poured for the policeman.

"Hey Damon, and thanks." The policeman took a long draw on the pink neon straw. "That's Miss Angela." The cop pointed to the other truck with the tip of the straw. "Miss Angela has decided that you are violating the noise ordinance, even though you aren't."

"What the hell, Paul? That woman is a serious pain."

"Yeah, I know. Maybe you could turn the volume down a couple clicks, though? I got a feeling that she's the kind to complain every day until we give in. The squeaky wheel, and all that."

"Sure, Paul. I can do that. Truth is the music's just for the girls. The crowd is there to see the routine."

"And to eat those fries."

"Yep, and the fries. Can I get you some to go?"

"You got it."

"I got something I want you to try. Come around to the order window, and I'll show you." Damon hopped back into his rolling chair and scooted to the fryer. When the two minute timer dinged, he pulled the basket, tossed the fries into the drainage pan. A quick shake of salt, and they were plated. Damon pulled three bottles of sauce, and some chopped herbs from the fridge. The fries were liberally sauced with the green, and then drizzled with the white, before getting a quick dust of chopped cilantro.

Damon slid the plate out the window. "Now this is my newest creation. Fries in chilequile sauce. You might have tried it on fried tortilla chips, but I'm using my fries."

"It's green." Paul looked unenthusiastically at the plate.

"Yep. And it's amazing. Go ahead and try it now. The green is from the tomatillo, a relative of the tomato. The white is crema, like sour cream. But it's not done yet. This is a mild heat, but, I have a secret weapon. A piquin sauce. There's no hotter pepper on the earth. And my sister, Brenda, has made a great hot sauce with it. This sauce, my man, will make you see God."

Paul popped a fry in his mouth before Damon dripped a tiny amount of Piquin sauce onto the plate.

"Try it now. And keep your soda handy." Damon slapped some extra napkins on the counter, ready in case the cop couldn't take the heat.

"Oh, shit!" The cop lunged for his drink, gulping half down without stopping. "Shit, that's some serious heat." Damon reached for the plate, but Paul dragged it out of his reach. "I didn't say I hated it. I just said it's serious. Seriously good. Man! Can I buy these?"

"Nope. It's just a little something I've been working on. You know, for the Miami Caliente competition. You can buy them that day, though."

"We'll that, right there, is kick-ass! It's a winner. You know your girl Angela's going to have it in for you, with her hot wings."

"She can bring it. Just as long as she is playing fair."

That weekend, Angel's Wings suddenly had three teenagers in short shorts and fake wings outside her food truck. Angela was providing competition. Marci chuckled as one skinny girl undulated, another crumped, and the last tried a tap routine in the sand. "Boss, you gotta see this!" Hip-hop music blared from the speakers, and the beach crowd laughed at the three clueless girls. Angela screamed at them, with little effect. The crumper tore the wings off her back and threw them at Angela, before stomping off. Damon tipped his head back and laughed. No problem competing with Angel's Wings today.

The following Friday, Angel's Wings featured three new dancers. These angels were slightly older, and had a slick hand-jive routine. They sauced the wings with big shaker bottles. The routine was trotted out every few minutes.

Damon noticed his sales were down a bit. Determined to hold his own, Saturday morning he ordered a crate of lemons, a crate of limes, and gross of straws with plastic tropical fruits at the top. Within minutes, Beth and Amanda worked out a Lemon Shake routine, and even found an old song from the 80's called *Shake It Up*. Every half hour they performed the three-minute routine, shaking lemonade and limeade for the crowd. The straw was placed when the shaking was done. They performed the hot sauce routine occasionally, too.

At the end of the day, Beth and Amanda sashayed to their bicycles, satisfied with their tips. The Angels were gone, exhausted from the continual dancing. Damon finished stowing the last of his gear, and pulled away from the lot as Angela swept up outside her truck. She appeared in Damon's rear view mirror, flipping Damon the Bird.

The morning of the competition dawned bright and clear. The rules of the competition were simple: Set up and do business as usual. The fans would judge, and vote for their favorite hot-sauced item. Smaller portions were on sale, so the crowd could buy many different dishes. The food truck with the most electronic votes from text messages won the competition.

Fans would be able to buy a half-order at Damon's food truck. He and Marci arrived early at his usual spot, pleased to find it open. Knowing the Miami Caliente festival would bring a lot of strolling tasters, Damon set about prepping a large amount of fries while Marci put out the Menu, complete with the Chilequile addition listed as the day's special. Damon watched her neat, clear printing showcase their signature dishes: Empanadas (fried meat pies) beef, vegetarian; Plain fries, and fries with a variety of sauces: Ketchup, Holy Mole, Damnation, and the hottest offering, Hellfire; Rolled tacos called taquitos; Homemade chimichangas. Marci added chili-cheese fries, and the creamy pineapple or mango freezer pops that would douse the fire for those who couldn't stand the heat.

Damon was so busy with prep work, it was nearly time to open when he noticed Angela struggling to anchor an enormous pair of bird wing banners to poles on each side of her truck. The effect created a visual barrier between the trucks and focused attention on the stage area in front of her truck. He admitted it was a smart move. But only if the wind cooperated.

Marci restocked the sauce bottles for Beth and Amanda. The Chilequile sauce was a hit, with its hint of habanero, and the unusual color of green tomatillo. An artistic squirt of crema and a sprinkle of cilantro was all that was needed to make the dish shine. The Piquin sauce that went with it, for the very brave, was generating awe amongst the hot-sauce enthusiasts. Damon was pleased with the roll out of his new twist on French fries. The heat and sun had folks coming for ice pops, and staying for the hot sauce or lemon shake routines, anxious to try those treats once their interest was snagged. The girls reminded everyone to "Vote Demon."

The sauciers took a break at one o'clock. They lounged behind the truck, under an awning in the lawn chairs Damon provided. "Boss, every time we started a routine this morning, Angel's Wings starts one too." Amanda pulled her braid over her shoulder, and played with the tip. "The music clashes with ours, and they practically have a little theatre set up for themselves with those banners. I'm usually farther ahead in tips on festival day. What's her problem?"



"Damned if I know. That area might look good, but the banners take up too much room. She can't really get a crowd in to the truck. Still, business is good. That's the free enterprise system for you."

"We'll, she's a pain, but she's doing really well. Her honey barbecue wings are sold out already."

"Hey, that's too bad. I don't know about you, but it's hard for me to vote for something I can't try. Hey, why don't you call your friends, ask them to stop by and try our empanadas and fries?"

Beth nodded happily and pulled her phone from the tiny pocket of her shorts. Damon went back to his fry station. Crowds were heavy today. He heard the roar of his motorcycle club's entrance in the lot, and grinned. It was about to become a blockbuster day in sales.

Voting closed at seven p.m. Winners were notified by a visit from the Mayor and the attention of a news crew. Damon stayed open to accommodate the few stragglers on the beach, but started closing shop at eight. At eight twenty, he realized that the Mayor was next door at Angel's Wings. Damon slumped in defeat for a moment. He really hated when the dirty players won the game. But the competition was excellent for business. It'd been a good day in sales for him. Maybe now, with a win under their belts, Angel's Wings would leave them alone.

Damon waved goodbye to Beth and Amanda, climbed into the driver seat of the truck, and waited for Marci to buckle up in the passenger seat. As they pulled out of the lot, Damon watched Angela clink glasses with the Mayor using cans of soda. *Lucky for me that I have off tomorrow*, he thought tiredly. *I can sleep in, maybe catch up with the club*. The ride to the fenced lot seemed long, and the trip home on his bike even longer.

At four a.m. Damon's cell phone gave an electronic warble on the bed stand. He groped for it as it vibrated towards the edge. Just as he captured it, the phone went silent. He dropped the phone back on the nightstand and rolled over. Too tired to be irritated, he drifted off to sleep.

The phone rang again at four ten. Damon cursed, and reached for the thing again. This time, he found it right away and snapped it open. "What?" Damon barked into the phone. "Um, no Sir. Sorry, Sir."

Damon listened in disbelief as the government health inspector on the other end of the phone explained that many competition attendees became sick overnight. He needed samples of the food sold from the truck, and every other vendor. There would be an inspection.

"I will meet you at your secure lot at eight a.m. Do not enter the truck without me present."

"Yes, Sir."

At eight sharp, Damon was waiting next to the truck, glad he'd taken time the evening before to break down properly. Everything should be tidy and sanitary inside. Damon watched as the inspector and his assistant went over every aspect of the truck, taking food samples and testing the knives and other utensils for cleanliness. The inspector found Damon's cleaning supplies in a bottom cupboard by the door, and nodded in approval. Damon could tell the inspector was dying to ask how he managed a food truck without working legs. The assistant stared at his prostheses, metal ankle joints shown off by a pair of long orange basketball shorts. The man quickly looked away when Damon caught him staring. Damon held his temper. Ranting at the inspector while he did the inspection was not a way to get a perfect grade.

The inspector pointed to the menu board, and asked if it displayed the menu for the previous day. Upon Damon's nod, he wrote down the menu items, and thanked Damon for his time. Damon mounted his bike and strapped on the helmet, pumping the volume on the headset radio. "Get your motor running," he sang along, "dead out on the highway." When he hit the highway, he opened her up and let her fly, let the wind take his frustration as it whipped his braid out in a straight line behind his head.

As the joyride wore down, Damon drove his baby over to the club house. The brothers were always ready with a beer, a funny story, and some macho companionship. Damon sighed as he settled in at the bar. He was up to play the winner of the current pool game, and he stretched his arms in anticipation, knowing they'd work harder than most people's due to the accommodations he made with the prosthetic legs. The balls clacked against each other on the green velvet, and he thought for a minute about the strategy he'd need to beat Gunny, who was sure to win the current game.

As he sat waiting, Marci texted him. He replied with an invitation to the club for a beer. Gunny bent his big frame over the table, and racked the balls. "You're about to get owned, son." Gunny grinned evilly and stretched for the break, making it clean and sharp. Twenty minutes later, Damon laid his fifty-dollar bill on the edge of the rail while Gunny looked for another sucker to beat.

Damon was still chuckling over the loss when Marci came in. Today she wore long white over-the-knee socks, an abbreviated black pleated skirt, a tiny black top, and a lot of skin. Her short hair stood up at several angles, as if she just stepped out of a cyclone. A newspaper was folded under her arm. Her black vans had skulls and hearts on them. The navel jewel was another skull with red gems for eyes.

"Hey, boss. What up?" Marci slid onto a bar stool, flashing a large amount of black panty in the process.

"Jesus, Damon, you trying to give an old man a heart attack over here?" Gunny shouted from behind the pool table, making shots for his own amusement when no one else would play.

"Is that a pistol in your pocket," Marci shouted over her shoulder, "or did I just make your day?" As the brothers guffawed, Gunny turned back to the pool table, the tips of his ears pink.

Damon sighed. "What do you want, Marci? It's been a hell of a day, and it's not even two yet."

"Wow, so glad you asked. And what about 'Hi Marci! How's Christopher, Marci? Thanks for busting your ass yesterday, Marci!'"

"How about 'Get to the point, Marci,' or so help me you'll walk outta here with an extra leg sticking out your skirt."

"Ummm, okaaaay. Guess which bear didn't get any porridge today!"

Damon sighed, and took a healthy sip of his beer. "Marci, please."

"Okay. Well, it's like this: your sister Brenda called and said to get over to the truck, so I did. But you were nowhere to be seen. So I said Okay, maybe he's late. But then I called and called you, and left like fourteen messages. Then you said you were here, so I had to take a cab to come see what it was like, and now, here we are! Isn't this great?"

"Sure. It's just groovy. But Marci, *why* are you here?"

"Because Brenda called and said to find you. You know, you have a cell for a reason." Marci smiled at the bartender, who slid a frosty glass of dark beer with a thick, creamy head in front of her.

"And why is it that I need to be found?"

"Because Brenda said to, and she was so excited!" Marci took a small sip of her beer, and licked the foam off her upper lip. Gunny sauntered over to inspect Marci's cleavage, and pretend to grab a handful of pretzels from the bar.

Damon's head hurt. Maybe the inspector found something wrong. Maybe they yanked his license. Maybe Brenda wanted to break it to him gently. "Look Marci, why did Brenda tell you to go to the truck?"

"Because of the paper. Don't you listen to anything? It's all right here." Marci plucked the paper from under her arm, opened it, slapped it on the bar, and pointed to page three. The headline read *Mayor Sick with Cailente Poisoning*. Gunny leaned over Marci's shoulder to read the article.

"I knew that already, Marci. I had a surprise inspection this morning."

"That's what Brenda said. Then she said you had to go back." Marci shoved at Gunny to make him back up a bit.

"Why, Marci?"

"To meet the Deputy Mayor. She's the only one who didn't get sick."

"You better not be here to tell me we're being shut down, Marci."

Marci turned to Gunny, and groaned. "Is this guy thick, or what? You tell him, Gunny."

Gunny raised a finger as he finished reading the article. Damon wiggled his beer glass on the tiny coaster, impatient. Finally, Gunny straightened. "Damon, you gotta go back. Like now, man."

"For the love of God will someone please tell me WHY?" Damon roared his frustration, and the brothers fell silent, looking at Gunny expectantly.

"It's all right there," Gunny pointed at the paper. "The food poisoning, the inspections, fifty seven people at the E.R."

"What does this have to do with me?"

"We'll they can't let her keep it. Not after she poisoned the Mayor. And everyone else." Gunny placed a thoughtful palm on Marci's backside. Marci kicked backwards, nailing him in the shin.

"They have to re-award it." Marci beamed. "Damon, you won! And you didn't poison anyone. And the ceremony is at two. You gotta jet, boss."

Damon sat, unbelieving, as noise erupted in the clubhouse. It took three long minutes to sink in. "I won. We won. Hey, We Won!" Damon stood, and pumped his fist in the air. "Son of a gun. We won! Marci, what the hell are you doing here? We gotta go."

As Damon moved towards the door, the brotherhood flowed with him, mounting up on their bikes. Marci perched on the back of his bike, a view of her long legs free to everyone they passed. His helmet sat crooked on her head, and he drove without wearing one himself for the first time in years. A long double row of hogs wove through traffic behind him as he neared his food truck. Standing by the locked gate, Damon saw a suited woman, several office workers, a news anchor with a microphone, and a camera crew. He grinned, his smile broad and white against his tan face. That was the first image used, Damon and Marci-long-legs flying on his bike. They were laughing. A long stretch of Harleys flowed behind him as his win was announced on the ten o'clock news.