

# Last Call

by Christopher R. Rice

I stared dumbfounded at the sheer selection of canned soups the corner store had to offer. Normally, I would have just cooked myself something in the kitchen of my pub, but a small fire accidentally started by an employee had necessitated a diet rich in bachelor food: ramen, canned soup, and frozen entrees that promised to feed a “hungry man.” Given that my small handbasket made it look like I was stocking up for the apocalypse I could forgive the wandering gaze of the clerk. Settling on something approximating to beef minestrone I meandered toward the checkout counter stopping long enough to pick up a few packs of beef jerky.

“That’s a lot of food, mister,” the clerk said looking at my basket. Maybe in his mid-20s the store clerk was of Middle Eastern descent, but had a Caucasian parent given his sandy blonde hair and grey eyes. I could tell by his accent that he was native born and was likely the child of one or more immigrants by his American accent.

“Yup,” I said noncommittally. Hopefully he would leave it at that.

“You know a steady diet of this stuff is likely to kill you,” the clerk said. I sighed inwardly. Guess he wasn’t.

“Highly unlikely. How much do I owe you?” I asked trying to hurry along the exchange. The clerk could tell he’d irritated me and rang up the items faster as we both remained silent. Spying the total on the register, I handed him money, waited for my change and then left. And that would have been that except as I walked out the door two men entered. I didn’t even need to catch their scent to know they were high on something – possibly meth given the harsh chemical smell assaulting my nostrils. One of the men had short shaved hair that had been died Kool-Aid red, while the other was covered in prison tats that screamed, “I’m *way* past my third strike.” Both were dressed in street clothes with comfortable running shoes.

Stopping at looking back through the door, I watched as prison-tats pulled a gun on the clerk without even screaming or shaking. He’d done this many times before. The clerk panicked and looked at me through the obscurement of advertising on the door. Kool-Aid turned to look at me to see what I was going to do and started making his way to the door, but before he could open the door I was already leaving.

“Sorry, pal. You’re on your own. I don’t do that sort of thing anymore,” I walked briskly down the street. My pub was about five blocks away and I was easily carrying 30 pounds of canned goods but it felt like a light bundle in my arms. I tried to wipe the look of the clerk’s face from my memory. Coming to my building I took the side entrance and climbed the iron lattice stairs to the second floor loft where I resided. I fished in my pocket for the keys and jammed them into the lock as I twisted the handle.

My loft apartment was dark and illuminated only by the dim glow of appliances. Sitting down the bag I shut the door and let out a breath. I'd ordered some Chinese earlier so I wasn't hungry at the moment. Flipping a light switch on a bottle of Jack drew my attention to the card table that served as my kitchen table. I didn't even bother to resist. I just went and poured myself a double, gulped it down, and poured another. I stopped after the second because I knew if I didn't I was going to drink myself into a stupor. Given that I lived above a pub with *lots* of alcohol that wasn't such a clear impossibility even given my metabolism. Sighing. I stepped on one boot and tugged until it came off and then did the same with the other before stripping my shirt off and collapsing into my bed. Sleep came mercifully quick.