



The Last Branch Down

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Two men walk from the parked SUV to the front entrance of the bar. The first man, the one in front, is tall and obese with pale white skin and a red hair covering his the top of his head and mouth and chin. He sports a cropped haircut, yet his mustache and beard is quite thick and long. The man's beard brushes against the collar of his blue cloth jacket covering a solid white t-shirt. The obese man's blue jeans fasten underneath his protruding gut with a black cloth belt. Worn white sneakers finish his outfit.

The second man, walking behind the first, points his head toward the ground. He is about a head shorter than his friend, but is only slightly overweight. This man's blond hair is parted down the middle with each side combed and tucked behind each ear. He's clean-shaven, which makes him look younger than his actual age. As for this man's clothing, he dons a brown leather jacket over a tan button-down shirt. A pair of black casual business pants and brown leather loafers complete the professional look.

The men enter the bar as evening begins on this cool Fall day. The opening door allows the fading daylight to slither inside, prompting the bartender to look up from his phone to see the two new patrons. The bartender's face brightens and he says:

"Hey there, Alex. I see you brought company tonight."

"I sure did, Cyrus."

"I thought you might be comin' tonight so I save your regular seat at the bar."

Alex walks over to the bar stools sitting underneath the bar's ledge and sits. His friend sits to his left. The latter looks over the establishment, viewing the clean but worn interior of decorations, the furnishing, and walls. The bar has little character as it's a bar meant to be a place for people to come and sit and drink away their worries or celebrate their wins.

"You want your regular, Alex?"

"Yep."

"What about you, partner? By the way, I'm Cyrus."

"I'm Bradley."

"He doesn't drink," Alex adds quickly.

"You don't?"

"No," Bradley responds with a shake of his head. "I don't like the taste."

"Well, I can fix that easily. What's your favorite soda?"

"Sprite."

"Hmm...white rum goes well with that. I can pour a shot of it into a cup for ya. You won't taste it at all."

"Nah, Cyrus," Alex interrupts. "Just give him the Sprite."

"No offense, Alex, but your friend really looks like he could use the alcohol. I can tell by his sour mood and long face there's some trouble botherin' him."

Alex shakes his head, growing tense.

"If you don't want me to drink, Alex, then why did ya bring me to a bar?"

"You want to tell me all about your woman trouble, and I can't listen to that completely sober."

"You're just like Sharon: Only thinkin' of yourself."

Alex grunts in response. The bartender clears his throat.

"I'll go get those drinks."

"Don't forget the rum in mine," Bradley says.

"Got it."

The friends watch the bartender grab a bottle of Bud Light from a cooler and place it on the bar top before Alex. Then he prepares the mixed drink, placing the pint glass before Bradley. The concoction fizzes loudly.

"Try it out, Bradley. Tell me how it tastes."

He acquiesces to the command, picking up the glass to take a sip.

"Oh, it's sweeter than normal."

"That's the white rum," the bartender says with a wink.

"Well, I can't taste it. Overall, I like it. Thanks!"

"You're welcome."

The bartender steps away from the pair far enough to appear not being nosy, but close enough to hear their conversation.

Alex takes a glug from his beer before saying:

"Go ahead and spill it."

"I don't want to talk, Alex. That's all I've been doin' since I found out yesterday: Talking to myself. What I want to do is find that Shane guy and smash his face in."

"Why do that and go to jail over some woman?"

"That 'some woman' was going to be my wife."

"You hadn't proposed yet."

"Well...no. I hadn't picked out the ring yet."

"Where did you meet this chick again?"

"You don't remember?"

"Nah, man. You told me the story some time before but I don't remember. Ya know what? Forget that question and tell me this: Why are you so hung up on Sharon? What makes her so special?"

"I'll tell ya but don't tune me out this time."

"I won't."

Bradley takes a long sip of his drink before speaking.

"We met at a restaurant during Happy Hour on a Friday night. I took my team out to celebrate completing a massive project successfully. Sharon was there with her friends on a girls' night out. She had a problem with her iPhone and I fixed her phone."

"That's some white knight shit there."

Bradley exhales hard and stares at Alex with fierce eyes.

"Where's your woman?"

"She's another man's problem now."

"And why is that?"

"Because I divorced her."

"But you liked her at one time, right?"

Alex nods then takes a sip of his beer.

"Don't you want another woman? Or get married again?"

"Hell no! I mean, I like women, and it would be nice to have one if we could just hang out and have sex from time to time. But I don't want another relationship. And I definitely don't want another marriage."

"You see I want all that. I want a relationship. And I want to get married. I thought Sharon was going to fulfill those dreams for me but that didn't happen. A part of me hates her for cheating on me, but another part misses her."

"That's normal. I felt the same way about my ex-wife for some time after our divorce."

Bradley lifts up the glass to drink the Sprite and white rum mixture again. Then he continues his story.

"After I fixed her phone I went back to my table."

"Why did you help her?"

"She was angry and in distress and I knew I could help."

"Ah, Bradley, you forgot to add this part: And she was pretty."

"Well...yeah...that was a big motivator."

"Of course! Pretty women can pull any man in. Doesn't matter if the man look like a Greek god or is ugly as sin."

"After I went back to my table Sharon didn't talk to me again until I got up to leave the restaurant. I saw that one of her friends prodded her to do so. She asked me on a coffee date, as a way to repay my help. I was so surprised she would do something like that. No woman's ever asked me out before."

Alex makes a "pfft" sound and says:

"You fixed her phone, which saved her money on repairs, and all she offered you was a coffee date?"

"It's the thought that counts."

“Not to women. They want to be wined and dined at the finest restaurants as their reward.”

“Some do but not all. Sharon wasn’t that way in the beginning. We went on the coffee date a week later. I was so excited for it, but that didn’t last long. After we finished our drinks she told me she asked me out so I could fix her Macbook. Sharon brought it with her to the coffee shop.”

Alex laughs, his entire body jiggling and shaking. Embarrassment turns Bradley red in his face and causes him to shrink onto the bar stool.

“Oh she’s good! Why did you take that shit?”

Bradley closes his eyes and says:

“Because a beautiful woman like Sharon hadn’t talked to me – let alone gave me any attention – in a long time.”

Alex sees the sadness in his friend’s face and sighs. Then his countenance softens.

“Don’t get sad, man. It happens to us all. Even me. I married my ex-wife ‘cause she was pretty, and pretty women usually have nothing to do with me unless they want something. My ex...well, she didn’t want anything from me. And I feel quickly in love. It was only after we got married did I discover she tricked me. She wanted a guy to take care of her financially and I was that sucker.”

“And I was Sharon’s sucker.”

“This deserves a toast: To our broken hearts and empty wallets.”

The men clink their beverages together and then drink. Then they stay silent for awhile. During that time Alex finishes his beer and motions to the bartender for another. Cyrus nods and fills the request, standing the beer bottle next to the empty one before taking it.

“You good with your drink, Bradley,” Cyrus asks.

He nods with a quick smile. The bartender gives a quick “okay” and goes to help another patron.

Alex drinks from his new bottle and then says:

“So you fixed Sharon’s laptop. What happened after that?”

“She was excited for a bit, then she got sad.”

“Why?”

“It hit her that she used me. She told me that later.”

“So what did she do?”

“She asked me out to dinner as repayment.”

“But you ended up paying, right?”

Bradley nods.

“Did you get any nookie that night at least?”

“No.”

"Bullshit," Alex snaps with a shake of his head.

"That happen a month later."

"A month filled with dates and outings on your dime. And gettin' her flowers. And buyin' the odd gift while you two are out. God, dating is so expensive for men."

"It sure is. As the months passed and we became a couple I gave Sharon money for bills. She earns considerably less than me and has some debts."

"Too many women are in that same position. That's why they're lookin' for a guy earning over six figures. It's the only way the guy can afford to take care of her."

"Well, I don't have to worry about Sharon's bills or her debts anymore."

"I think that deserves another toast."

The doorbell rings and travels through the ranch-style house. A white woman, appearing to be in her mid-forties, exits the kitchen carrying a pair of wine glasses. She wears a gray v-cut blouse that is unfortunately too tight around her mid-section and black leggings taut against her thick thighs. Her bare and recently-pedicured feet leave slight imprints on the carpet.

The middle-age woman's auburn hair sweeps along her shoulders, as she switches one of the wine glasses from one recently-manicured hand to the other so she can open the front door. She reveals a younger, thinner woman with a full face of makeup holding a bottle of white wine. The younger, thinner woman wears a denim trucker jacket over a red fitted button-down blouse that accentuates her full bosom. Tight dark wash blue jeans magnificently displays her round behind and slender legs. A pair of high-top cloth boots finishes her outfit.

"I'm ready for ya, Sharon."

"I see."

"Come on in. It's just us ladies. Billy took the kids out to the bowling alley."

The guest enters the house and the older woman closes the door behind her.

"Let's go take a seat on the couch and pop that bottle open. Momma wants to drink in this peace and quiet 'fore those kids come back."

"You want to drink, Joanna, but I *need* a drink. Do you got a corkscrew?"

"Sure do. Go ahead and get comfy on the couch while I go back into the kitchen to get it."

Sharon does as commanded, placing the bottle of wine on the coffee table before plopping down onto the couch. About a minute later the host returns with the corkscrew. She makes quick work removing the cork from the wine bottle, setting it onto the table. Then she pours the wine into each glass and says:

"Oh, Sharon, honey, you look pathetic."

"Jesus, Joanna, I came here to drink and maybe get some words of encouragement."

"Hmph. You're in for a rude awakening."

The host gives her friend a full wine glass before taking her glass and sitting down on the couch.

"Go ahead. I already got one today."

"What happened between you and Bradley? You were cryin' so much on the phone this mornin' I couldn't understand ya, darlin'."

"Oh, he was so mad, Joanna. God, I never seen him that mad. I never though Bradley could get *that* mad. He doesn't look like it from the outside."

"Every man can, no matter how nerdy he is. And, yes, Bradley is nerdy. When you push any man too far he'll blow up."

"He was so *mean* to me. I didn't think he could be like all the other men I dated. He never gave me that sign."

"He said those things 'cause you hurt him deeply, Sharon. I bet Bradley meant some of it, but not all."

Sharon gulps down some wine before saying: "I didn't mean to hurt him, though."

"Oh, so you didn't mean to screw your ex-boyfriend, huh?"

Sharon cuts her eyes at Joanna and curls her lips into a deep frown.

"Go ahead and give me as many death stares as you want but girl, you know I'm right. You messed up a good thing. You threw away a perfectly good relationship for some sex. Why?"

"Shane was more than sex. He always has been."

Joanna groans loudly and rolls her eyes. She finishes her antics with a long sip of chilled wine.

"You don't get it, Joanna: Shane has been my longest relationship."

"Yeah, 'cause y'all broke up three times during, what, the past four years?"

"Only because we were unsure about the future."

"No, Shane was unsure."

"Aren't all men are when it comes to settling down?"

"Yeah, but most men decide to go ahead and settle down when they meet a good enough woman. Shane is not most men, however. And you still haven't told me why you slept with him while datin' Bradley."

"Bradley is a nice guy but...but he's not Shane. He's not handsome. And he doesn't have muscles. And he's not exciting, which doesn't get me excited. Especially in bed."

"So you threw away a good relationship over sex? I was right!"

"Fine, fine! Yes, sex was a big reason why I cheated. It's just that Shane knows what to do. Bradley doesn't. I can tell he hasn't been with many women."

"Girl, most men don't know what to do! That's why you gotta show them!"

"So you're fine with an inexperienced man, Joanna?"

"Hell yes! Especially if that man is payin' all my bills like Bradley did for you. I can teach a man how to please me sexually. I can't teach a man to financially support me."

Sharon goes silent and takes another gulp of wine with a defeated look on her full face of makeup.

"Listen, Sharon, I gotta be honest with ya, honey. You don't have many options left. You're on the wrong side of thirty, you work a basic job makin' basic money, and you're tryin' to coast off the last of your good looks. You want a man like Shane, who is good-lookin', tall, and has a good job. But men like Shane don't want you. Why? Because men like Shane can get younger, prettier women. You need to accept a man like Bradley. He will be ecstatic to have a woman like you on his arm and in his life."

"If Shane doesn't want me then why did he have sex with me? That must mean something, right?"

"Let's find out:: Has he called or texted you since your fling?"

Sharon averts her eyes and holds her wine glass close to her chest.

"Shane, won't call ya and Bradley won't accept your calls. You really messed up, girl."

"I know! I know! Stop saying that!"

"Well, what are you gonna do?"

"Give Bradley some time to cool off. Once that happens I'll beg for forgiveness. I'll tell him I'll never cheat on him again. And I'll do anything he demands."

"If that doesn't work what then?"

"I make things work out with Shane."

"And if that doesn't work?"

"One of these options is gonna work, Joanna. It just has to."

Alex and Bradley exit the bar and walk toward Alex's SUV.

"Are you good to drive," Bradley asks.

"Yeah. I only had two beers. I'm not even buzzed."

Bradley gets into the passenger's seat as Alex stuffs himself behind the wheel. After starting the vehicle, he backs up the car and pulls out of the parking lot onto the street.

"One thing I gotta warn you about, Bradley, is what Sharon is probably gonna do next."

"And that is?"

"She's gonna give you some time to cool down. Probably a week or so. Then she'll call you and ask to come over. Or she'll just show up to your house. When that happens do not let her come inside. Talk to her outside your place, got it?"

"I got it, Alex. Why shouldn't I let her come inside?"

"She'll try to have sex with ya. All to trick you into forgiving her. My ex tried it and I dodged all her advances. Plus, I didn't want to take the chance of gettin' her pregnant. Then I would've been stuck with her indefinitely. Sharon is probably gonna try the same 'cause she's desperate."

Bradley sighs. "I wanted kids with Sharon, but I don't want to be trapped by her with a kid, if that makes sense."

"It does. A long time ago I wanted kids too. Now, I don't. It's nothin' against kids, but it's just havin' them puts men into a difficult position. Nowadays a woman can just take your kids and go about her life while the man has to pay child support and beg the court for visitation. It's not right but there's little us men can do about it."

"So this is it: I truly done with her. I don't have much in life, Alex, you know that. I mean, I have a good job and I own my house, but I don't have many friends or much of a personal life. But I do have my dignity and I can't lose that."

Alex waits to respond as he makes a series of turns in a congested area.

"I gotta admit, Bradley, being alone sucks at times. Yeah, I got my friends but they're all guys with wives and families. They can't always hang out. And I do desire a nice lady to spend time with. You know, go out on dates, watch movies, things like that. I know I said back in the bar I don't want a relationship anymore but that's a lie. It's a nice way to make myself feel better. It's just...I mean, it's hard to put myself out there. Especially now that I'm so fat. No woman would want me, want all this."

"You can always fix yourself up, Alex. You can buy some better clothes and get a nice haircut and a shave. Change out the t-shirts for a nice knit shirt, or even a button-down. Then you can work on losing weight."

"You got a good point there. I need to take better care of myself."

"I'll help you stay on track. And you can do the same for me. Like you did today. Thanks for listening to all my troubles, Alex. It really did help to talk about them."

"You're welcome, man."

The doorbell rings, causing Bradley to pause his computer game so he can grab his phone from his desk. He opens the camera app and sees Sharon standing outside at the front door. He sighs, closes the app, and gets up from his desk, pocketing his phone. Bradley walks to the front entrance of his home and opens the door.

"Oh thank God," Sharon exclaims. "I thought you wouldn't open the door."

"What do you want want, Sharon," he asks with an unamused look with a bothered tone.

"I want to talk. I waited a few days and called you but you didn't pick up. And you didn't respond to any of my text messages."

"I didn't want to talk to you. That's why I didn't answer your calls or texts."

"Can we talk now?"

"Fine."

"Can I come in? It's a little chilly out here."

"No."

"Well, I won't talk out here."

"Then let's talk in your car."

"Why can't I come in, Bradley," Sharon asks with a grating whine.

"Because. Now are we gonna talk in your car or not? If not, you can go. I'm done."

A scowl darkens Sharon's face.

"Fine! Let's talk in my car."

Bradley nods, steps outside, closes the door behind him, and follows Sharon to her vehicle. He slides into the passenger's seat as Sharon turns the heater on after starting her car. The sun fights to break through the early afternoon cloudy sky.

"How are you," Sharon asks.

"How do you think? I'm miserable. I'm not sleeping well. And I'm distracted all the time."

"I'm really sorry, honey."

"Are you? Or are you sorry you got caught?"

"Both."

"So why did you cheat on me, Sharon? How did it happen?"

"You went off to that work function out of town, and I was feelin' lonely so I went out to one of the bar I go to, hoping to meet one of my girls there, but no one could come. I thought about leavin' but I didn't 'cause I didn't want to be alone. So I go in, sit at the bar, and then I see my ex-boyfriend Shane. Honestly, Bradley, I had no idea he worked there. Last I heard he was down in Miami workin' at a fancy restaurant.

"So he sees me and we get to talking. He allows me to drink for free since he's the bar manager. And Shane kept complementing me and I felt really good from that and the wine. Shane asked me for my number and I gave it to him. I knew that was a bad idea. And I should've told Shane I was in a relationship, but I didn't. I didn't want to scare him off just in case he was still interested in me. Then the bar got busy and I decided to go home."

"When did you sleep with him?"

"Later that night. Shane texted me after he finished work a little after two in the mornin'."

"And you happened to be up," Bradley asked with thick sarcasm.

"He always like to come over late for sex."

"So you allowed him to use you like that? Don't you have any dignity?"

Sharon averts her eyes from Bradley's glare.

"No. Not when it comes to Shane."

"Why not? Why do you allow him to treat you that way?"

She raises her face and meets Bradley's eyes.

"He's so handsome, Bradley. And he's the type of man I always wanted. He's tall and fit and now has a good job. I wanted to marry him and have his children."

"I wanted to marry you, Sharon. I hoped we would have children."

Her eyes grow large. "Really?"

Bradley nods.

"We still could. We can work everything out, Bradley. I won't cheat on you ever again."

"Tell me," he says coldly, "did Shane ever call you back after your fling?"

Sharon shakes her head, her hair swishing back and forth.

"So you want him but he only wants you for sex. I want you but you don't want me. Looks like both you and me are the losers in this situation."

"I'm so sorry, Bradley."

"You are. Because I think you know you're probably not gonna find a guy like me willin' to take care of you. And love you. And treat you with respect. Now you're stuck takin' care of yourself while you go back onto the dating market until you settle for a guy to avoid loneliness."

"Bradley, don't be like that. Just give me another chance."

"I can't, Sharon. I actually *have* some dignity. Yeah, I'll be alone but I can look at myself in the mirror without hating myself."

Bradley exits the car and walks back to his house, making sure to not look back.