

Dinner for Several
(First Act)

John Shanahan

edited for 2008 production
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Dinner for Several was first performed November 2004 by the Medway Players, with the following actors:

Carter Sullivan	<i>Ed Benjamin, III</i>
Jim Ellington	<i>Phil Fougere</i>
Liz Schiller	<i>Liz Rose</i>
Paul Sorrenti	<i>Frank Hughes, Jr.</i>
Karen Johannsen	<i>Karen Gibson</i>
Celine Ferris	<i>Suzanne Taylor</i>
Mrs. McGonigle	<i>Christine Grudinskas</i>

Directed by Michael Legge.

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For information on producing *Dinner for Several*, please e-mail playwrightj@yahoo.com.

DINNER FOR SEVERAL

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Carter Sullivan.....Late 20s to early 30s. Average-looking guy. Tends to go through the play with a very resigned air about him.

Jim Ellington.... Also late 20s to early 30s. Slightly nebbishy, but sharp and fast with a quip.

Liz Schiller..... Late 20s and attractive. She has a quick wit and loves bantering.

Paul Sorrenti..... Early 30s and very handsome. Every inch a boorish salesman, from his clothes to the way he treats people.

Karen Johanssen...Late 20s. Tall and attractive. Packs a bit of nervous energy and tends to speak first and realize what she's said later.

Celine Ferris..... Early 30s. Pretty in an understated way. She's shy but can suddenly show depth and color.

Mrs. Oona McGonigle...In her 60s, very motherly and Irish. Speaks with a faded brogue and is immediately and completely likeable.

ACT I

All action takes place in the main room of Jim Ellington and Carter Sullivan's apartment. It's a small room, and cluttered with guy-stuff. There is a couch that's seen better days, half-heartedly covered with a slipcover, and a shabby recliner that has a cup holder duct-taped to one arm. There is a table with three mismatched chairs in front of a window. Two doors on the right wall go to the adjoining bedrooms. An opening just right of center goes to the kitchen.

JIM ELLINGTON *enters through the front door. He's an average-looking guy, early to mid-30s. He's just in from a long day at work. He's still in his suit, and carries a briefcase.*

JIM Oh my God, what is that amazing smell?

CARTER *(off)* It's dinner. And thank you!

JIM What are we having?

CARTER *(coming to the kitchen doorway)* We're having an herb-crusted pork tenderloin in a green peppercorn sauce with caramelized shallots and steamed sugar peas. And we does not include you.

JIM Ah, a first date. I get it.

CARTER No, it's a second date, thank you. Sometimes they say yes.

JIM No, this would be the first real date after the approval date.

CARTER What are you talking about?

Jim tosses his coat and briefcase into the bedroom.

JIM Your dating M.O. The Carter Sullivan Two-Step Date Approval Process. First you go on a date that's not really a date. It's a scouting mission. You want to find out whether or not she's worth the effort that goes into a Carter Sullivan Love Dinner.

CARTER You're ridiculous.

JIM *(sitting in the recliner, but not pushing back)* You never own up to this, but you do it every time. If you like a woman after that scouting date, you go for the *real* first date—a home-cooked gourmet meal at Chez Carter.

CARTER I was going to call it Chez Jim, but it kills the appetite.

JIM Hey, I'm just giving you a hard time. But it *is* kind of funny.

CARTER I'll try not to love you less. *(Starts to leave, but stops.)* Do I really do this all the time?

JIM Now I'm sorry I brought it up. Don't worry about it. I was kidding.

CARTER I think it's a great idea. It's just like going to a restaurant, except you don't have to deal with trying to shout over people to hear each other, or worrying about people smoking around you, or—

JIM Tipping.

CARTER What?

JIM Tipping. I hate it. I'm very bad at tipping.

CARTER You mean you're cheap.

JIM No, I'm just bad at it.

CARTER Jim, it's a matter of figuring out 15 percent. *(pause)* And you're an accountant.

JIM I just don't like it. One time, I was on a date—a first date—with this girl named Kenya.

CARTER Kenya?

JIM Like the country. So the bill comes—it's like forty bucks—and I leave a tip, then I have to go to the bathroom. Well, what happens—and I only find this out later—is that the waitress comes over, sees my tip, and asks Kenya if anything was wrong with the service.

CARTER How much did you leave?

JIM I don't remember. Three bucks?

There's a pause as Carter just looks at Jim incredulously.

JIM I told you, I'm not good at it. Anyway, the waitress shows Kenya the bill and—get this—shows her my tip. So Kenya apologizes to her and gives her a ten-spot. End of the night, she tells me she doesn't want to see me again, and lays this story on me.

CARTER Wow...

JIM Didn't know I was that cheap, huh?

CARTER No, I'm just amazed anyone would name their kid Kenya. *(He turns and goes back into the kitchen.)*

JIM So who's the lucky girl? I don't remember you mentioning that you were seeing anyone.

CARTER *(off)* It's Karen.

JIM Karen? You mean Karen, Celine's friend?

CARTER *(coming back to the doorway)* Yeah. We went out about two weeks ago, and then earlier this week I called and asked her—

JIM *(almost lewdly)* To the Love Dinner.

CARTER To have dinner with me, and she graciously accepted, thank you very much. She's really nice. Thanks for introducing me.

JIM My pleasure. I wish you the best of luck.

CARTER Hang on. I have to baste. *(He goes back in)*

JIM Yep, me too. Seems like that's all I've been doing lately. Getting pretty good at it, too. I'm becoming a master baster.

Jim checks the duct tape on the cup holder, and pushes the recliner back.

CARTER *(off)* What about Celine?

JIM Celine?

Carter enters.

CARTER Yeah, she's sort of cute.

JIM *(pause)* I work with her.

CARTER And?

JIM Rule One: Never poop in your own backyard.

CARTER Oh, that's attractive.

JIM I am totally against dating in the workplace.

CARTER What about that girl Teresa?

JIM Teresa is why I am against dating in the workplace. Every day, a yellow sticky on my computer: "Thinking of you." "Dreaming of you." "Missing you." You know, I tested her once. I made sure there were no stickies when I left the office, and I made sure she was gone for the day. Next morning, I get to the office at six-thirty. I'm the only one there, and there's a sticky on my computer. To this day, I have no idea how she did it. Then, when I broke it off, more yellow stickies: "You suck." "You suck." "You suck."

CARTER Still—Celine seems pretty nice.

JIM She is. And I've thought about it, but... *(He pauses, shakes his head, then, sort of reluctantly...)* She does have really nice eyes.

CARTER *(crossing to the kitchen door)* I'm just thinking that you could use a date. No offense.

JIM None taken.

CARTER You haven't gone out with anyone in a while.

JIM Yes, but on the up-side, six more months and I'm an honorary monk. Plus, my virginity grows back.

CARTER Good luck with that.

Carter exits to the kitchen. The phone rings. Jim fights with the recliner, which won't go down at first. He wallops the arm of the chair with a fist, and it releases him.

JIM *(answering the phone)* Hello?...Sure, hold on. Carter! For you.

Carter enters and takes the phone from Jim. Jim exits to the bedroom.

CARTER Hello?... Karen, hi. How are you?... Good, good. What's up?... *(He looks disappointed.)* Oh. No, that's okay. Is everything all right?...You're sure?...Really, it's okay....What?...Oh...pork tenderloin. Actually, it's, uh, herb-crusted tenderloin... Hmm?...Rosemary, thyme, some garlic. A green peppercorn sauce....Green...No, don't worry. Not really a problem, okay? Another time, maybe? *(Long-ish pause, and Carter's face falls a bit.)* Sure. Sure. Well, um...okay. Take care. Bye now.

Carter hangs up and walks reservedly back to the kitchen. Jim enters.

JIM Was that Karen? *(Pause)* Carter?

CARTER *(coming to the door)* Yeah. That was Karen.

JIM Nice phone voice.

CARTER She's blowing me off.

JIM What?

CARTER Can't make it. Something came up.

JIM Like what?

CARTER *(making quote fingers)* "Something."

JIM *(pause)* Her period?

CARTER No, you dipshit. Just something. Some big, vacuous something. In other words, she changed her mind.

JIM Oh. Sorry, pal.

CARTER *(trying to buck up)* So...you in the mood for herb-crusted pork tenderloin with caramelized shallots in a green peppercorn sauce and maybe some clumsy, half-drunken attempt to get you to sleep with me?

JIM Eh...this, uh...this ain't your night, sport.

CARTER You're blowing me off, too?

JIM I'm going out with Sorrenti. *(He looks at his watch)* Should be here pretty soon, actually.

CARTER Is he cuter than me?

JIM You're welcome to come out. We're probably just going to grab a bite, maybe shoot a few racks down at the Eight Ball. You want to come?

CARTER Do I know Sorrenti?

JIM Phone guy.

CARTER (*knowingly*) Ohhh...how many is he up to now?

JIM I think he has at least three, and at least two beepers. I'm really afraid that he might have gotten one of those walkie-talkie phones.

CARTER I hate those.

JIM They make you look like a mall security guard. So...you want to come out?

CARTER No. I think I'll stay here. Finish cooking, wrap stuff up for later. Thanks, though. I'll save you some. (*He goes back into the kitchen.*)

The front door buzzer sounds. Jim goes to the door and thumbs the switch to open it. He opens the door and leans out, looking down the stairwell that's right outside the apartment. After a moment he steps back, with an "uh-oh" kind of look on his face, to let LIZ SCHILLER in.

JIM (*suddenly remembering, and pointing at her*) Liz! You're coming over tonight.

LIZ (*pointing back*) You forgot to tell him.

JIM I did. And that would be a bad thing.

LIZ (*catching a whiff of dinner*) Oh my God, it's a first date.

JIM Second. Listen, Liz, you have to be really nice to Carter. She just blew him off. Like two minutes ago.

LIZ (*sincerely*) Is he okay?

JIM Is a guy ever okay when he gets blown off?

LIZ (*Sniffing the air*) That's the tenderloin with the peppercorn sauce, isn't it? (*Jim nods.*) Is he doing the caramelized shallots?

JIM He's doing the shallots. And sugar peas.

LIZ (*with the slightest air of disappointment*) Oh. Then, uh...I won't stay long. I just wanted to—

Carter enters from the kitchen and stops cold.

CARTER Hey.

LIZ Hi.

A very awkward pause follows. Liz and Carter maintain eye contact. Jim fidgets. Then:

JIM (*moving "stealthily" across the room toward his door*) Carter, Liz called last night. She's coming over tonight to pick up some books. She'll be here between six and seven. (*He glances at his watch.*) Oh! Look at the time! It's between six and seven! Gotta get ready.

Jim exits quickly through his bedroom door.

LIZ You need a better secretary.

CARTER (*trying his best to be distant*) Yeah. Cuter, too. So you need some books?

LIZ Yes. Psychology textbooks. I left them here. You wanted to read them.

CARTER Yeah. I never did.

LIZ They're a little dull. Psychology.

Pause. Their discomfort is growing.

CARTER Let me throw some foil on this stuff and I'll try to find them for you. Are you in a hurry?

LIZ No. No, that's fine.

Carter starts to move back toward the kitchen.

LIZ Are you okay, Carter?

CARTER (*forcing a smile*) Yeah. I'm okay.

LIZ Good.

CARTER I'm doing okay.

LIZ Okay.

CARTER Okay. Good.

LIZ Good.

CARTER Okay. (*beat*) I'm not okay. I miss you. Eight months without you, Liz...

LIZ We've seen each other.

CARTER Yes, but those strangled little conversations when we happen to be at the grocery store at the same time don't count. Although there *is* something erotic about watching you buy zucchini.

LIZ I give them names.

The tension breaks—slightly.

CARTER I'm sorry for how I reacted just now. I really wish Jim had told me you were coming. I was not ready for this. Especially not after... *(He fades, realizing he probably shouldn't mention his date.)*

LIZ Jim told me. I'm really sorry.

CARTER First time out of the gates, you know? Not a great omen.

LIZ You haven't been seeing anyone?

CARTER Have you?

LIZ Not.....recently.

Carter looks as if he's about to ask a question, but is fighting hard not to. Liz relieves him.

LIZ Can we not go there? *(Carter nods, understanding.)*

Jim enters.

CARTER I should grab those books for you. I think they're on my bookshelf.

The phone rings. Jim answers it.

JIM Hello? Hey, Sorrenti! Sure thing.

Jim hangs up, then crosses to the door and presses the buzzer to let Paul in.

CARTER He couldn't just ring the bell?

JIM He prefers to call.

CARTER I got five bucks says he's on the phone when he comes in.

JIM That's a sucker bet.

Jim opens the door and PAUL enters, talking on a cell phone. He's between late 20's and early 30's, and is very handsome, with an athletic body. He's dressed for a night of babe-hunting. When he comes in, he shakes Jim's hand absently, nods vaguely at Carter, and then catches sight of Liz, who he seems unable to disengage from.

PAUL *(into the phone)* That's exactly what I'm talking about..... Exactly. Just hold off for right now, okay? Let's give it a day.....Okay, but no more than that, all right? Good. Look, I'm with a friend right now....

A beeper goes off. Without missing a beat, Paul pulls a beeper from his pocket, checks the number, puts the beeper back, pulls another cell phone from a hip holster, and starts to dial—talking the whole time.

PAUL No, not that kind of friend. *(He smiles at Liz.)* But the night's young, know what I'm sayin'? *(His attention goes back to his call)* Listen, if you're going to call, make it important. Okay, I gotta run. Hot beer and cold women, you know?

One cell phone goes into the pocket as he hits "Send" on the other.

PAUL Hey, Jim How's it going?

JIM Not bad. I was—

PAUL *(into the phone, cutting him off)* Hey, it's Paul. You called me. Call me back. *(He ends the call, but keeps the phone in his hand, constantly fidgeting with it like a toy.)* I hate when they can't wait like two minutes for you to call back.

JIM Yeah. That's bad.

PAUL *(catching wind of dinner)* Wow, what are you cooking in here? Smells great!

CARTER It's a pork tenderloin.

LIZ *(meaningfully)* With caramelized shallots.

PAUL You're a very lucky girl.

JIM Paul Sorrenti, Liz Schiller. Liz is Carter's, eh... his...friend. Liz. You know Carter, Paul? You guys met?

PAUL I think so.

CARTER Pretty sure.

LIZ Nice to meet you.

PAUL Pleasure's mine.

CARTER You should grab those books you want, Liz. The ones you came for. The ones in the other room.

LIZ *(uncertainly)* Okay... Excuse me a minute. *(She exits into Carter's bedroom.)*

PAUL *(turning to Carter)* Well, all right! Dinner's not even done and she's already in the bedroom! *(He laughs. Jim feigns a half-hearted laugh.)*

CARTER It wasn't for her. It was for a date who blew me off.

PAUL Ouch. Sorry to hear that, champ. Hey, why not come out with us?

CARTER Thanks, but I've got things to do here.

PAUL I bet you do.

JIM So, Sorrenti, you want to get going or what?

PAUL You know what you should do? You cooked that food and all, right? And there's a nice girl already here. Why not make it *her* dinner?

Carter obviously likes the idea.

JIM Carter...

CARTER What?

JIM Probably not your best idea.

CARTER Just friends.

JIM Not likely.

CARTER Yes, likely.

JIM Carter, this is a mistake. It's not a good idea to make a love dinner for your ex-girlfriend!

PAUL She's your ex? Well, all right! You got the right idea, buddy!
(Liz enters, with books in her hands. Paul doesn't see her. Carter and Jim do.) What's better than ex sex, right?

LIZ That depends on the ex.

PAUL *(turning)* Got me there. I didn't mean anything by it.

LIZ No doubt.

PAUL But come on, it's not such a bad idea.

BIG, uncomfortable pause. Carter and Jim look at each other; Carter and Liz look at each other.

PAUL The *dinner*, for cryin' out loud!

General relief breaks over the room.

LIZ What dinner?

JIM Sorrenti, we should go.

PAUL Yeah. We should go.

They head for the door. Jim exits; Paul stops and turns back to Liz.

PAUL (*suavely*) It was very nice to meet you, Ms. Schiller. (*His cell rings and he answers, talking as he exits.*) Hello. Yeah, you called me. What's up?

LIZ He remembered my last name.

CARTER What?

LIZ Men never remember last names. Sometimes they can't even remember first names.

CARTER If you say so, Ms. Miller.

LIZ So what's this about dinner?

CARTER Oh, uh...Sorrenti suggested that maybe, since the food's mostly cooked, I should, uh...I should ask you to stay. For dinner.

LIZ Oh.

A pause as Carter works on getting up the guts for the next line and Liz tries to figure out what to do.

CARTER Listen, Liz...I've got the meat cooking, I've got all the other stuff bought and chopped and ready, and it's just not going to taste as good for breakfast.

LIZ You and Jim could have it for dinner tomorrow.

CARTER After he blew me off for another man? I don't think so. Liz—it's just dinner. Really. Please stay.

LIZ No ex sex?

CARTER (*VERY sincerely*) That's not up to me.

LIZ All right. But listen—the caramelized shallots aren't going to impress this time.

CARTER (*mock slyness*) The shallots impress every time. (*pause*) Kidding.

LIZ I don't think you are. Because this is very similar to the meal you made for our first date.

CARTER (*sitting across from her*) It's a second date.

LIZ Of course it is.

CARTER Did I really make this for you?

LIZ Yes. I distinctly remember the tenderloin. It's great. And of course there's the shallots. But I think we had rice instead of sugar peas.

CARTER I've got rice.

LIZ No need.

CARTER I really made this for you?

LIZ Yes. You use food a lot, Carter. Kind of an emotional replacement thing.

CARTER Oh, boy! Dinner *and* psychotherapy!

LIZ I'm not analyzing, I'm just saying... You know what you told me once? That when you get depressed, you cook.

CARTER That's because when I get depressed, I eat.

LIZ A lot of people do, Carter, but most of them go through a box of Twinkies or a couple pints of Ben & Jerry's. Most people don't whip up an order of bouillabaisse to chase off the blues.

CARTER I like to cook, Liz. That's all.

LIZ I know, but it's more than that. It's like when you can't express something, you cook. If you need to impress someone, or apologize, or show them that you care, you cook. *(pause)* You know how I knew that things were wearing down between us, Carter? The meals.

CARTER How's that?

LIZ The meals you made for me. When we started dating, it was like this—gourmet cooking, little experiments, funky ingredients. And as we went along, you'd cook less, and when you did, it was less...interesting. Do you remember what the last thing you made for me was? *(Pause.)* Meatloaf.

CARTER *(defensively)* Ground pork *and* ground veal.

LIZ Still, Carter. Meatloaf.

CARTER Did I do the fontina cheese topping?

LIZ *(almost angry)* That's not the point! It was meatloaf! It was as if I wasn't worth the effort anymore. You know how people say, "What am I, chopped liver?" It's sort of like that. But with meatloaf. So I knew. When I think about you and cooking, I remember that some of the best meals came after we fought.

CARTER *(moving slightly toward her)* There weren't that many.

LIZ *(softly)* Yeah, Carter, there were.

A brief, uneasy silence. Then Liz laughs wistfully.

CARTER What?

LIZ I was just thinking how other people have make-up sex, and we had the Apology Buffet.

CARTER Followed by make-up sex. Which was almost as good as the food.
(Pause) So you'll stay?

LIZ Okay. But no getting me drunk. That's no fair.

CARTER Well, that saves me half a glass of wine.

LIZ Hey!

CARTER What? You're a lightweight. Okay. No getting you drunk.

LIZ And I get most of the shallots.

CARTER Now you're pushing it.

LIZ We go 70-30 on the shallots or I walk.

CARTER Are you sure you're not a lawyer? Deal.

They shake hands, but quickly, slightly embarrassed that they're touching.

CARTER *(moving to kitchen)* Okay, let me put the tenderloins back in and do a little more prep work. I think a few extra shallots might be in order.

Carter exits into the kitchen. Liz drifts through the room. She's smiling, and touches things with an air of nostalgia. The door buzzer goes off.

LIZ *(calling off)* Should I get that?

CARTER *(off)* Please! It might be Jim. He forgets his keys.

Liz crosses and presses the buzzer. She opens it and, after a few moments, KAREN steps into the doorway, holding a bottle of red wine. She's tall and pretty and definitely dressed for a date, but looks a little worried. When she sees Liz, she's more worried.

KAREN Oh. Hi. Is this...I'm looking for Carter.

LIZ *(awkwardly)* He's here. Come in. I'll get him.

Karen comes in, staying close to the door—too close. Liz stands there for a moment, holding the door until Karen realizes Liz can't close it. They laugh nervously. Karen steps aside. Liz closes the door.

LIZ Hang on. I'll get him for you.

Liz exits into the kitchen. Karen fidgets by the door.

CARTER *(off, surprised)* What?

Carter enters.

CARTER Hi.

KAREN Hi.

CARTER This is a surprise.

KAREN Yeah. I know I called and canceled earlier, but... *(she holds up the bottle)* I brought wine.

CARTER *(with disappointment)* Oh...

KAREN I'm sorry. I know it was a bad idea for me to come. I don't know what I was thinking. I'll just get going.

CARTER No, it's not that. It's...red wine with pork. Not really a good choice.

Liz enters and picks up the books.

LIZ Carter, I'm going to head out.

CARTER No—wait. Can you just hang on for just a minute?

LIZ I don't think—

KAREN It's me who should probably leave.

CARTER No. Please. Both of you. Karen, this is Liz. Liz, Karen. Liz stopped by after you'd called and canceled, so I offered dinner to her. *(To Liz)* But can you just wait one sec, please? I need to talk to Karen.

KAREN I don't want to intrude.

CARTER You're not. Really.

Carter turns to Liz and holds up one finger, with a pleading look on his face. She sighs, puts the books back down, and goes to the kitchen.

KAREN I'm really sorry about this.

CARTER No, it's fine.

He waves her over toward the couch. They sit.

CARTER I'm just curious why.

KAREN Why I canceled or why I came over?

CARTER Let's start with why cancelled.

KAREN This will sound bad. I just broke up with a guy a couple weeks before you asked me out. I...got dumped, actually, and when you asked me, I jumped on it, you know? And I had a really nice time. But...it felt like a rebound date—like maybe I hadn't waited long enough. And then you invited me over tonight, and I figured maybe that feeling

would go away. So I was in my car and driving over ...it just didn't seem *fair*, you know? It didn't seem fair that you'd go to all this trouble and I might be sitting there thinking about...him. You're really sweet, Carter, and you should be making dinner (*she glances toward the kitchen*) for someone who deserves it.

CARTER She just happened by. (*Karen gives him a well-intentioned "Oh, please" sort of look.*) No, honestly! She came by to get some books.

KAREN She's pretty. Who is she?

Carter stumbles for a moment. He doesn't want to admit it...

CARTER Friend of mine.

KAREN You should have that dinner with her. She might become more than a friend.

CARTER Yeah, well...no. But look—if you didn't want to have dinner, then why did you come over?

KAREN I felt bad. You went to all this trouble and now you'd have all this food just going to waste, and...well, I thought that maybe I could try to...just do the dinner and...talk, maybe? I really had a nice time when we went out, Carter.

CARTER Me too.

KAREN Maybe deep down I realized I should at least let you try to change my mind. Or just take it off my boyfr—my ex.

CARTER The thing that really confuses me is that when I suggested that maybe we could get together another time, you said, "I don't think that's a good idea right now."

KAREN That sounded bad, huh?

CARTER Not as bad as "When hell freezes over," but it runs a close second.

KAREN Sorry.

CARTER Karen, I'm glad you showed up—really. But I'm just not comfortable being a second choice—and not a real certain second choice at that. And as much as I'd like the chance to change your mind, I shouldn't have to.

KAREN You're right. (*She rises. Then, very gently*) Can I at least leave you the wine?

There's a sort of change in Carter's face. He's honestly surprised and touched by this. A silent moment passes as he takes the bottle from her hand and they look at each other.

LIZ (*off*) May I come out now?

CARTER Oh! Yes! Sorry about that.

Liz enters and heads quickly for the table to gather up her books. Karen moves uncertainly toward the door.

LIZ Carter, I'm going to—

KAREN I should probably just be—

CARTER Stay.

LIZ Woof.

CARTER I mean, stay...for dinner. Both of you.

KAREN What?

LIZ Excuse me?

CARTER I feel bad that I've invited you both and now both of you feel like you should go, and—why not just stay and have dinner? There's plenty.

LIZ I don't know, Carter...

KAREN Are you sure about this? I don't want to get in the way.

CARTER You're not. Honestly. Jim was giving me a bunch of crap earlier because I always cook for women I'm dating. But...what if I was just cooking for friends? Friends who happen to be two incredibly attractive women. Would that be so bad?

LIZ Well...

KAREN Um...

CARTER I'm pretty sure Jim has "Steel Magnolias" on video. We could watch it after dinner and have a girl's night.

KAREN You're kidding, right?

CARTER Of course I am. He has that movie with Cher and Winona Ryder.

Carter and Liz laugh. Karen looks a little confused.

KAREN Is Jim gay?

Laughter stops.

CARTER Sorry?

KAREN I was just wondering, you know, with the Steel Magnolias thing.

CARTER Oh no, no. I was just kidding. He's in a sort of self-imposed sexual exile, but he's not gay.

LIZ You're sure, right?

CARTER Definitely. He kisses like a straight guy.

KAREN I didn't know. It's just that—this is kind of funny, but Celine and I were talking about that recently.

LIZ Who's Celine?

CARTER She works with Jim. He thinks she's cute.

KAREN He does? Really?

CARTER Nice eyes, he said. But Celine thinks Jim is gay?

KAREN Actually, we were trying to figure out why he hasn't asked her out yet, and "gay" sort of came up as a reason.

CARTER He's not gay. Celine's interested in Jim?

KAREN She says they get along great, and she's always wondered if they'd hit it off.

CARTER Huh. I'll have to drop a couple subtle hints.

LIZ Jim doesn't take subtle hints.

CARTER Sure he does. You just have to smack him hard enough. So...we're good for dinner, then?

LIZ Well, I guess someone has to protect Karen from the shallots.

CARTER Precisely.

KAREN What's wrong with the shallots?

LIZ It's what's right with the shallots that's dangerous.

KAREN Do I really want to know what you're talking about?

CARTER No. So what do you say?

KAREN Why not? I've been in worse company.

Carter and Liz look at each other uncertainly.

CARTER I'm going to go into the kitchen, throw some stuff together, and try to figure out if that was a compliment. *(He exits.)*

KAREN So how long have you known Carter?

LIZ About three years. We were together for two.

KAREN Oh...

LIZ *(pause)* He didn't mention that, did he?

KAREN Not at all. Well, just when I thought it couldn't possibly get any *more* awkward...

LIZ It's okay. Really. We've been apart almost a year now.

KAREN Bad breakup?

Liz looks at her in solid disbelief.

KAREN I'm sorry. That was pretty horrific of me. I just—sometimes I talk before I even know what I'm saying.

LIZ We have to buy you some filters. Or some brakes.

Carter enters.

CARTER You know what? Before I get too involved back there, I'm going to run down to the store for some more wine. White wine. Anything you like in particular, Karen?

KAREN I don't mind white zinfandel.

CARTER Friends don't let friends drink white zinfandel.

KAREN Chardonnay, then? Or is that punishable by death?

CARTER Oh, she's good.

LIZ I like her already.

CARTER Chardonnay it is, then. Back in a few minutes. Play nice.

Carter exits.

KAREN He's so cute.

LIZ Yes, he has his moments.

KAREN I'm glad we're doing this. I'm glad we both decided to stay.

LIZ Good.

KAREN You are okay with this, right? You're not just saying it?

LIZ Once the itchy uncomfortableness goes away, it'll be fine. It's a little strange.

KAREN It's different, I'll say that. Dinner with a guy I almost stood up and his ex-girlfriend. That's one for the diary.

LIZ I'd have to agree, it's a first. At least we get well fed.

KAREN It smells wonderful. So what do you do?

LIZ Psychology student. Working on my Master's.

KAREN Interesting.

LIZ Yeah. And you?

KAREN I'm in marketing.

LIZ Interesting.

KAREN Yeah.

There's a difficult pause.

LIZ You want to ask about me and Carter, don't you?

KAREN What?

LIZ You want to know what happened.

KAREN Well.....yeah.

LIZ You want to know what you're getting yourself into.

KAREN Oh, it's not like that.

LIZ Of course it is.

KAREN Of course it is. How often do you get to meet and interview the ex-girlfriend of the guy you're thinking of seeing?

LIZ Interview?

KAREN You know what I mean. Did you ever get to meet one of your guy's exes?

LIZ *(a bit distantly)* Once. More or less. *(back in the moment)* So you want to know about Carter, but you'd already stood him up.

KAREN Yeah. I felt sort of weird because I broke up with my boyfriend about a month ago.

LIZ Sorry to hear that. How long were you together?

KAREN Only a few months. Seven. He broke up with me, actually. He said I complained too much about him not making enough time for me.

LIZ Football? Car?

KAREN Oh, it's not like that. He has a lot of different business ventures going, and they always seemed to take precedence over me.

LIZ I've been there, believe me. Hey, do you want a glass of wine? I'm sure there's at least one bottle in the fridge. *(She heads for the kitchen.)*

KAREN I brought some red.

LIZ *(passing through the arch)* So I heard.

KAREN Carter's kind of funny about food, huh?

LIZ *(off)* The word you're looking for is "obsessive."

KAREN When he first started talking about making me dinner, it was like....like....

LIZ (*off*) Foreplay?

KAREN Exactly!

LIZ (*coming back in with two glasses of wine*) You know, in a way, I think food is foreplay for him.

KAREN Just food?

LIZ Oh, no.

KAREN Oh, really?

LIZ (*almost wistfully*) Oh, yeah.

KAREN My boyfriend was never big on that. He said it takes too much time.

LIZ Was he a minute man?

KAREN You're terrible! (*She sips her wine*) Minute and a half, tops.

LIZ Why is it men can waste four hours watching football but they can't spare us a fifteen minute warm-up?

KAREN Is Carter a football fan?

LIZ (*with a big, nostalgic grin*) Not at all.

KAREN You miss him.

LIZ (*breathless pause*) We have *got* to get you those filters.

KAREN But I'm right, aren't I?

LIZ You can't be with someone for that long and then just...forget. Forgetting takes a little longer.

KAREN I think you forget nice guys quicker than jerks.

LIZ True, but for different reasons.

KAREN I don't get the feeling Carter was a jerk.

LIZ No matter how nice they are, all men have their inner jerk.

KAREN Seems like I get all the outer jerks. So Carter has an inner jerk?

LIZ It's not like a real jerk. It's just that Carter gets...lost.

KAREN How do you mean?

LIZ It's like, on Monday you get flowers because he was thinking of you. And then you don't hear from him for a week because he got caught up in something at work or with Jim or his buddies. But then when you

point out to him that he's been (*making quote fingers*) "gone," he gets all apologetic and sweet. And he makes dinner and he gets romantic and works really hard at pleasing you. He's inconsistent. That's the best word for it. Inconsistent. And after two years, the inconsistencies were becoming more common. It got to me, I guess. I'm not high maintenance or anything, but...we like to feel special, right?

KAREN Amen. Is it too much to ask that they treat us like the goddesses we are?

LIZ I've never found a guy who doesn't lose interest.

KAREN They don't exist.

LIZ I hear that.

They clink glasses.

KAREN Men should come with a warranty.

LIZ A warranty?

KAREN Definitely. "If, within 90 days of your first date, your man stops buying flowers, telling you how beautiful you are, or paying attention to your womanly needs, you may return him for a full refund."

LIZ I like the way you think, Karen. Let me ask you something. You were going to blow Carter off, and then you changed your mind. Why? It can't all be guilt.

KAREN Never underestimate the power of guilt.

LIZ I know this is your second date because you're getting dinner, so—

KAREN Say that again?

LIZ Oh, it's a Carter thing. He goes out on a first date, and then on the second date he makes dinner. But he considers it a first date. Jim calls it the Love Dinner.

KAREN And he does this all the time?

LIZ As far as we can tell.

KAREN What did he make you?

LIZ Um...this.

KAREN Oh.

LIZ But with rice.

KAREN I feel better now.

LIZ (*vaguely*) At least it's not meatloaf.

KAREN Meatloaf?

LIZ We're getting off track here. So what is it about Carter that made you change your mind?

KAREN It's less about Carter than it is about me. I realized that it's not good for me to get all hung up on one guy who didn't even have time for me. Carter had time for me. Even when I called to cancel, he was like, "How about another time?" Not angry or anything. That's nice. Oh, here's something—When we went out, I was running late. When Carter got to my place, I wasn't ready. Celine invited him in to wait because it would only be like ten minutes, but he said he had to run down and put some money in the parking meter and he'd be back.

LIZ *(missing the point, but covering)* That's...nice.

KAREN There aren't any parking meters where I live.

LIZ *(absently, with a smile)* Yes, that's my Carter.

Karen looks at her for a moment, aware that Liz has no idea she's just said "My Carter."

KAREN So that's why I'm here. Now why are you here?

LIZ *(caught off guard)* Because I...my books. The books I came to get.

A silent pause. Karen smiles, then rises.

KAREN I need to use the bathroom. Is it...?

LIZ Through either of the bedrooms.

KAREN *(sly)* Which do you recommend?

LIZ Carter's. Jim's a slob. Well, more of a slob.

Karen exits through Carter's door.

Jim and Paul enter. Paul is on one cell phone, and is dialing another as he talks.

PAUL *(into phone)* Just like that, I'm telling you. And I've only had it back a week...Oh, believe me, he'll hear from me. I'm calling him now.

LIZ What happened?

JIM Paul's car died about ten minutes down the road. Just out of nowhere. Stopped cold.

PAUL *(into phone)* You want to listen in? I'll use another phone so you can hear. I'm gonna rip him a fresh one.

JIM And then he started calling everyone he knows to complain about it. It was an interesting walk back.

LIZ You want interesting? I got interesting.

PAUL *(into phone)* Because he deserves it for calling himself a mechanic.

JIM *(confidentially, to Liz)* Wait...watch this. *(Not looking at Paul, and quietly)* Hey, Paul, going to be on long?

PAUL *(into phone)* Yes, I am. You bet I am. Right now.

JIM Who's da man, Paulie?

PAUL *(into phone)* I am....That's right.

JIM Going to call your mom next, Paul?

PAUL *(into phone)* No, not really. Hold on a sec, would ya? Hey, Jim? It's still not funny, okay? Wasn't funny walking here, isn't funny now. *(into phone)* Back... No, my boy Jim is trying to be funny. *(He exits into the kitchen, talking)* Meantime I got a transmission sitting in the street....

JIM So you were saying? Something about something interesting? I'm interested in interesting.

Karen enters.

JIM Hey, there's a woman in my bedroom. That's interesting.

KAREN Hi, Jim.

JIM Hi, Karen. You're here. And Liz is still here. You're both here. But Carter's...not here?

LIZ He stepped out to get more wine. He'll be back.

JIM More wine and two women? I think I've stepped into a porno movie.

KAREN He invited us both to stay for dinner.

JIM A porno movie with a plot! Excellent!

LIZ You know how Carter is, Jim. It all got tangled with both of us showing up, so he feels like he has to make it up to everyone. So he invited us both, and we decided to stay. After all, it is the tenderloin.

JIM With the caramelized shallots.

LIZ Oh, yes.

KAREN What is up with the shallots?

Paul enters from the kitchen, putting his phone away.

PAUL All right, that's one crucified mechanic.

He stops when he sees Karen. There should be NO giveaway that they were ever together. Neither wants to admit it at this point. Paul stops but then his hunter's grin comes over his face—it just looks like yet another she-target has wandered into his sights. Which, in fact, is has. Paul is amused that Carter's date turns out to be Karen. Neither of them are going to turn over this moment.

PAUL Hi.

KAREN Hi.

JIM Paul, this is Karen. Karen Johanssen, Paul Sorrenti.

PAUL How are you?

KAREN *(slightly strangled)* Good.

PAUL Hello again, Ms. Schiller.

LIZ Paul.

KAREN Is Carter back yet?

LIZ Not yet.

KAREN I could use more wine.

LIZ There's more in the fridge. You haven't finished that one, though.

Karen picks up her glass and drains it, then heads for the kitchen.

LIZ And now you have.

JIM Wine sounds good. Paul?

PAUL Got beer?

JIM Sure thing. *(He exits to the kitchen)*

LIZ Let me ask you something.

PAUL Shoot.

LIZ Earlier, when you and Jim were leaving—you remembered my last name.

PAUL Yeah. And...?

LIZ Guys don't remember last names. Especially not last names of women they just met.

PAUL This guy does. In my line of work, it's important to remember names. It makes people feel good. If I see a guy I've talked to before, a potential client who might be on the fence, and I can say, "Hey, Mr.

Jones" or "Hey, Mr. Skuratowicz," it can be the difference between closing the deal or watching them walk. It makes them feel like they matter. And in your case, it doesn't hurt that you're pretty memorable.

LIZ Is that one of your standard lines?

PAUL No. Sometimes I make 'em up on the fly.

JIM *(off)* Paul, you want a glass?

PAUL Sure! I'm feeling classy.

LIZ So how am I memorable?

PAUL Are you fishing for compliments? Because I prefer to let them come naturally.

Jim comes in with a glass of beer and a glass of wine. He very obviously sets Paul's beer into the cup holder on the recliner—away from Liz.

JIM Here we go.

Paul sits in the recliner and pushes it back.

LIZ Where's Karen?

JIM *(nodding toward the kitchen)* In there.

LIZ What's she doing?

JIM Drinking.

LIZ Interesting. *(She exits to the kitchen.)*

JIM So what should we—

A beeper goes off. Paul gives the one-hand "Hold on" signal as he checks the number.

PAUL Gotta take this one. Might be— *(he tries to push the recliner forward, but it won't go)* Might be impor— *(tries again, no luck)* Might be—*(tries again, no luck)* Jesus!

JIM Well, if it's Jesus, you should definitely take it.

Jim whomps the arm of the recliner, which promptly shoots forward, almost rocketing Paul out of it.

PAUL You need to get that fixed.

JIM You're right. It needs a cup holder on the other side, too.

PAUL If you'll excuse me, this might be important, if you know what I mean. *(He takes out a phone and dials, heading for Jim's room. When he talks, he has a sort of "smooth operator" tone in his voice—it's a*

woman on the other end) Hi, it's me. I am so glad you called. (He exits into Jim's room)

Carter enters with a bottle of wine. Stepping in, he stops and looks, puzzled, at the fact that there's no one here but Jim.

CARTER This is different than when I left. When I left, there were two women here.

JIM Hi. I'm home. Paul's car broke down, and we walked back here.

CARTER And Paul is....

JIM My room. Care to guess what he's doing?

CARTER *(crossing to the kitchen)* The smart money says he's on the phone.

Karen enters quickly from the kitchen nearly colliding with Carter. Liz is close behind.

KAREN Oh! Carter! You're back!

CARTER I am.

KAREN Where did Paul go?

JIM He's making a call.

LIZ There's a surprise.

KAREN Carter, can I talk to you for a second?

CARTER Sure. Everything okay?

Karen takes Carter aside.

KAREN I'm really sorry about this, but something's come up and I really ought to go.

CARTER That was sudden.

KAREN I know. I'm sorry. I'd like to see you again, if that's okay. Another time.

CARTER Are you sure everything's okay?

Paul enters.

PAUL Sorry about that. Business. I don't get a minute's rest.

JIM We should head out, Sorrenti. We don't want to be in Carter's way when he's cooking for his ladies.

PAUL Ladies? You're making dinner for both of them? Wow. Even I haven't had the balls to try that one!

KAREN It was very sweet of him.

CARTER It was very sweet of me.

JIM (*moving quite obviously toward the door*) So, Paul, where do you want to go, huh?

PAUL Got enough for two more?

CARTER Huh? JIM Say what? KAREN *What?*

PAUL Well, you're halfway to a dinner party already, right? Me and Jim, we're not really going anywhere.

JIM We're not?

PAUL Not until I hear about my car. Or unless you plan to *buy* one in the next five minutes. So I was just thinking that if you've got enough...

CARTER Well... (*He looks to Liz, who shrugs, and to Karen, who just looks rather blank*) Karen was just saying she had to—

KAREN I'll stay.

CARTER Didn't you say something came up?

KAREN It went down again.

CARTER Okay.... Well, why not? It's been a while since I did dinner for more than two. And I've got four pounds of meat cooking... I'll need to get a couple more things to go along with it, though. And a salad.

LIZ (*to Jim*) He's going into cooking mode.

JIM Full steam ahead. It's so much fun to watch.

PAUL (*reaching for his wallet*) Let me give you a few bucks for the stuff you need.

KAREN (*suddenly*) Five!

PAUL I was thinking more like twenty.

KAREN No. I mean there's five of us. Five's an odd number. Someone gets left out—you know, when people start talking and stuff. Five's odd. I could call Celine.

JIM Celine?

KAREN Your secret's out. We were talking about you.

JIM Well, I....

KAREN She'd love to see you.

JIM She would?

KAREN (*finger to her lips*) She's been waiting.

JIM She has?

LIZ (*to Carter*) Is he really that oblivious?

CARTER Apparently. It's kind of sad, really.

KAREN Should I call?

Jim looks to Carter, who gives him a knowing nod.

JIM Yeah. Yeah, ask her to come by.

CARTER Paul's got a phone you could use.

PAUL Very funny.

Karen takes her cell phone from her purse and turns back to Jim.

KAREN Mind if I take it in here? (*pointing to Jim's room*)

JIM Why not? Everyone else does.

Karen exits. Paul's phone rings. He takes it out and answers and immediately goes into Carter's room. Carter and Jim look at each other and shrug. Carter exits to the kitchen.

LIZ She's cute.

JIM How's that?

LIZ Karen. She's cute, don't you think?

JIM Definitely. Nice boobs.

LIZ (*coldly*) I didn't notice.

Jim shoots her an "Oh, come on" look.

LIZ (*giving in*) Okay. Nice boobs. Carter likes her, right?

JIM He'd probably like her more if she hadn't blown him off.

LIZ Sure, but...do you think he likes her?

JIM I'm becoming a little uncomfortable with this line of questioning. Is there a reason you're asking me this?

LIZ No. No, I just—I was wondering, that's all. I want him to be happy. Is he happy?

JIM Not really. Hasn't been for a while.

LIZ How long is a while? (*Jim gives her a knowing look*) Oh. That long.

JIM Liz, are you....were you thinking—

Karen enters and puts away her phone.

KAREN Celine is on her way. She's very excited.

JIM Good.

Jim looks at Liz, knowing there's unfinished business.

KAREN She was working late and I told her just to come right here from the office, not go home to change and keep us waiting or anything. I told her it was just a casual friendly thing, so if she doesn't look, you know, super pretty, you have to be okay with that, all right?

JIM If only women were that fair.

Paul enters, holding his phone.

PAUL You know, some days I just want to shut these damn things off so I can get a minute's peace.

JIM So why don't you?

PAUL What? And miss a call?

Carter enters from the kitchen.

CARTER All right, troops, here's the plan. If this is going to work, I'll need full co-operation from each and every one of you. Some of us may not come back alive. But those who do will eat well tonight.

JIM What would you ask of us, mon capitain?

CARTER James, you are to take Paul on a quest for more wine. It must be white. It must be dry. It must be plentiful. Do you understand?

Jim pounds his chest like a Roman soldier.

JIM Mine is not to question why. Mine is to find wine and buy.

CARTER Elizabeth, you will come with me on a foraging mission. We require vegetables, and possibly some goat cheese and endive.

Paul very surreptitiously dials his phone with one hand, keeping it out of sight of the others.

LIZ I don't remember that being on the menu.

CARTER It is now.

LIZ & JIM (*looking at each other*) Cooking mode!

Paul's beeper goes off. He closes the phone in his hand, keeping it out of sight. He checks the beeper, then dials with the phone that's in his hand, all while Carter delivers the next line.

CARTER Karen, you will stay here and prepare to grant Celine entry to the realm, but only if she knows the password.

PAUL *(into phone)* Yeah. You called?

KAREN What's the password?

CARTER There isn't one.

KAREN Tricky.

PAUL No, I have time. Hold on, okay? *(hand over phone)* Look, this might take a while. I have to take this. Is that all right? Jim, I'll give you the money for the wine when you get back. Okay?

Without waiting for an answer, he turns and goes into the bedroom.

PAUL *(into phone)* Okay, go ahead...

JIM *(after he's gone)* No problem, Paul. Use my room if you like. Great. Okay, I'm off to get wine. Dry, white, and plentiful.

Jim exits.

CARTER Karen, we'll be back in a bit. Shouldn't take long. Make yourself comfortable.

KAREN Okay. Hurry back.

Carter and Liz exit. Karen takes a slow lap around the apartment, ending up by Jim's bedroom door.

KAREN They're gone. You can come out now.

Paul enters from the bedroom. He's smirking, phone in hand.

KAREN Ah, yes, the incoming call from yourself trick. I thought I recognized it.

PAUL *(flipping his phone shut and putting it away)* Works every time.

KAREN Makes me wonder how many times you used it on me.

PAUL Not too many. Once or twice. *(smugly)* So you're the one who blew off Carter. Small world.

KAREN Too small. So make a little space and leave.

PAUL Now that would look awkward. And rude. Turning down a nice invitation for dinner—

KAREN You invited yourself.

PAUL -I couldn't do that.

KAREN Well, I could.

PAUL And what? Now you call Celine and you tell her not to come because you're leaving? You know she wants to see Jim, so now you're telling her she can't?

KAREN She can still come. She can stay. I'll go.

PAUL Sure, that would be comfortable for her. You told her I was here, didn't you?

KAREN Yes I did. Goddamn it, Paul, why can't you just go? Why can't you just admit you made a mistake, tell them you're my ex-boyfriend, apologize, and go?

PAUL Have you stopped to think that maybe this is supposed to happen?

KAREN Oh, what? Now it's fate bringing us together instead of you being an asshole?

PAUL You have to admit, it's pretty weird.

KAREN Do you miss me?

PAUL *(not entirely ready for the question)* I've been thinking about you, yeah.

KAREN That's not what I asked. Do you miss me?

A cell phone rings.

KAREN Very good. I didn't even see you dial.

It rings again.

PAUL It's a real call. That's my business phone.

Silence. They stare at each other as it rings again. It's a standoff. On the fourth ring, Paul turns away and answers.

PAUL Paul Sorrenti.

KAREN You're unbelievable!

PAUL Billy! What's up?... Am I busy? *(He looks at Karen)* Not for you, my friend. How can I do ya?

Paul exits into Jim's room. Karen paces for a moment, worried and thinking over her options. She stops near the kitchen door, sniffs the air. She shakes her head as if in defeat, then goes to her purse and takes out her cell phone and dials. Offstage, in Jim's room, another of Paul's cell phones rings.

KAREN I was talking to you. Get out here *now*. (*short pause*) I know you're on the phone, Paul, and I don't care! We need to talk right now. (*pause*) No, Paul, it can't wait. See, this is exactly what I've been talking about. You never have time for me and when you do, it all gets shoved aside if one of your buddies or a "business contact" calls. Do you know how that feels? Do have any idea what it's like to be sitting in a restaurant and to suddenly realize that people are looking at you because your date has been on the phone for the last half hour? Well I do, and let me tell you, it sucks. And I- (*She stops and looks at the phone.*) And I can't believe I'm doing this on the phone with someone who's in the next room! (*She storms over to Jim's door and throws it open.*) Get out here!

PAUL (*entering, with phone in hand*) Bill? Let me call you back.

A long pause while they stare at each other.

PAUL What?

KAREN You weren't even listening to me, were you?

PAUL Sure I was. (*Pause*) Okay, not entirely. But you do tend to go on a bit.

KAREN Leave.

PAUL No.

KAREN Leave.

PAUL No.

KAREN (*pause*) Please leave.

PAUL No thank you.

They stare at each other a moment. She's ready to kill; he's looking smugly amused. The door buzzer goes off.

KAREN That'll be Celine.

PAUL Saved by the bell.

KAREN Yes, you were. Okay, it's obvious you're not going to leave. Fine. I'll deal with it. I'm used to you making an ass out of yourself. So let's just try to have dinner with our friends like civil human beings. You behave yourself, I behave myself. And when dinner's over, you'd be doing me a big favor if you'd just jump out the window.

Paul crosses to the window and looks out.

PAUL Second floor. Probably just break a leg.

KAREN I'll settle for that.

Karen opens the door. CELINE FERRIS enters. She's in nice work clothes. As she comes in, she's looking around.

CELINE I'm not holding things up, am I?

KAREN Not at all. Come on in.

CELINE Oh, it smells wonderful! Where is everyone?

KAREN Out getting some more things for dinner.

CELINE So it's just us?

KAREN At the moment.

CELINE Just you, me, and Paul?

KAREN Yes.

Celine storms across the room to Paul.

CELINE *(with real anger)* Get out, you jackass!

PAUL What?

CELINE Get out!

PAUL *(somewhat amused)* No!

CELINE Get out.

PAUL No.

CELINE Please get out.

KAREN I tried that.

PAUL Got a bug up your ass, Celine?

CELINE No, Paul, it's you. You're up my ass. *(beat)* Oh God, that's a terrible image.

Paul crosses to the armchair and sits.

CELINE Why do you have to ruin this night for everyone, Paul?

PAUL I'm doing no such thing. I'm just having dinner with friends. And how am I ruining your night, Celine?

CELINE By existing, Paul.

PAUL I know what you're worried about, Celine. This is kind of like your first date with Jim, and you've been hoping he'd ask you out, so you want everything to go right. Not a problem. You'll do fine whether I'm here or not. Jim seemed really pleased that you were coming. Oh, my...I just remembered...I hope you don't turn Jim gay, too.

KAREN Paul, you jerk!

CELINE *(slowly, angrily)* Kyle was already gay.

PAUL Of course he was.

KAREN Paul!

CELINE He was gay and he was confused and I was just trying to help him.

PAUL I'd say you succeeded.

KAREN All right, let's stop this right now. Celine, I can deal with Paul being here. It's okay. And Paul, you've already established that you're a prick, so there's no need to try to impress us by being insensitive, too.

PAUL She started it.

KAREN She was just expressing what all of us are already feeling.

PAUL No, it's what you two feel. Jim doesn't want me to leave. Carter seemed okay with it. And I know Liz wants me to stay.

KAREN Is that supposed to make me jealous?

PAUL I'm just saying.

KAREN Sorry to burst your balloon, but Liz is here for Carter. She wants him back.

PAUL No she doesn't. *(He pushes the recliner back)*

KAREN Trust me on this one, Paul. She came here tonight to be with him.

PAUL How do you know?

KAREN I'm a woman, Paul. I know.

PAUL And yet you decided to stay...

KAREN I didn't know until after I'd accepted his invitation.

PAUL *(smirking)* Of course you didn't.

CELINE Who's Liz?

KAREN Carter's ex-girlfriend.

CELINE What?

PAUL You didn't tell her?

KAREN It slipped my mind.

CELINE Ex-girlfriend?

KAREN It's a long story. You'll need wine. Come on.

They exit to the kitchen.

PAUL *(to himself)* Liz wants Carter back, huh? Oh, this just got so much better!

He laughs, and tries to get out of the recliner. It's stuck. He wallops the arm. Nothing happens. Hits it again. Nothing. Hits the other arm. Nothing. With a shrug, he hits both arms at the same time, which only serves to push it back further. As he ponders his situation, a cell phone rings. He answers.

PAUL Hello? Gary! What's shakin', brother? Me? I'm, uh...I'm trapped in a recliner at the moment. Recliner. You know, a chair. *(He rolls out of the chair by going over the arm and heads for Jim's bedroom.)* So what can I do for you today, my friend?

Jim enters with three large bottles of wine. He sets them down on the table. He sees the recliner, shakes his head, and crosses to it. He kicks it lightly on the side, then, with a simple press of his foot on the footrest, he sets the chair back upright. Celine and Karen enter from the kitchen. They both have wine.

JIM Hey! You made it!

CELINE Yes, thanks for inviting me.

Jim crosses toward her. As he gets closer, she sort of leans in toward him. He reaches out and shakes her hand. It's a friendly, hand-over-hand shake.

JIM My pleasure! I'm really glad you came. It'll be fun. Let me just put this stuff away and I'll be right with you.

He exits into the kitchen.

CELINE He shook my hand.

KAREN Yes. And....?

CELINE What kind of guy greets his date with a handshake?

KAREN A...polite guy?

CELINE Remember that conversation we had about Jim?

KAREN No, Celine. No. Jim is not gay.

CELINE But what if—

KAREN Don't let Paul do this to you, Celine. Don't. Kyle was a gay man in denial. You did not make him gay. One bad date does not change someone's sexuality.

CELINE Bad date?

KAREN Look, if that were the case, Paul would have created a world of lesbians by now.

Jim enters. Celine sits on the couch. Karen, seeing that Jim is headed for the recliner, hurries over to sit in it. She smiles at Jim, who looks at her for a moment then sits on the couch as well.

JIM So! Welcome. Kind of weird to see each other outside of work, isn't it?

CELINE Different, yes.

JIM I don't hang out with many people from the office.

CELINE Me neither.

JIM Yeah.

Jim glances over at Karen, who gives him a little head-signal to say something about how Celine looks.

JIM You look nice.

CELINE Thank you.

JIM Those colors are fabulous on you.

At the word "fabulous," Celine shoots a panicked look over at Karen, who can only shrug.

CELINE Dinner smells great.

JIM Carter's quite a cook.

CELINE Do you cook, Jim?

JIM I've been known to whip up a pretty hearty bowl of Spaghetti-o's now and then. Sometimes with little tiny meatballs.

CELINE Well, I'm looking forward to it. *(she chuckles)* Although I have to say it's a different kind of evening than I'm used to, what with Carter's ex-girlfriend being here and Paul-

JIM Oh, you met Paul?

CELINE Of course I did! After all, he's-

KAREN *(panicked!)* In the other room! On the phone! Talking! On the phone! They met. Before he got on the phone. In the...other....room.

Celine looks at Karen for a moment. Jim, who was looking at Karen, turns to look at Celine. As soon as he turns, Karen makes a "Stop! Shhh!" motion with her hands. Jim looks back to Karen as she composes herself.

JIM Is there anything I need to....know?

KAREN (*going behind the couch*) All you need to know is that you've got a lovely date for dinner, and you two have been looking forward to getting to know each other better. (*She reaches out, grabs their shoulders, and all but shoves them together.*) Everything else will take care of itself.

Jim and Celine look at each other. They've never been quite this close. Jim's a little uncomfortable with it, and slides just slightly away.

JIM She's right. This will be fun.

Paul enters. He looks at the recliner, surprised that it's back in place.

CELINE I'm sure it will.

A beeper goes off. Paul checks it.

PAUL Oh, for the love of God...

Pulling out a cell phone, he heads back into Jim's room.

JIM I'm going to start charging him rent.

KAREN You'll be rich.

Carter and Liz enter, with Carter opening the door to let Liz through. They're both holding a bag of groceries.

CARTER You're taking this the wrong way!

LIZ Is there another I should take it? (*She notices Celine, and her attitude shifts*) Hi! You must be Celine. (*She shoves her bag into Carter's arms and crosses to Celine.*) I'm Liz Schiller.

CELINE Nice to meet you.

LIZ Where's Paul?

Pause.

LIZ Of course.

CARTER Surprised you couldn't sniff him out. (*He exits to the kitchen*)

JIM (*aside to Liz*) Trouble?

LIZ It's his eyes. They're green.

JIM (*missing it*) I always thought they were brown. Huh.

LIZ (*drawing Jim away slightly*) He made a comment in the store about how I seemed attracted to Paul and he wouldn't let it go.

JIM Are you?

LIZ Jim!

JIM I'm just asking.

LIZ I don't...I didn't...you're as bad as him!

JIM Liz, why exactly are you here?

Paul enters.

PAUL Dinner smells great. I hope it's soon. Hey, Carter! How much time we got left?

CARTER (*coming to the doorway*) I'm just throwing together an appetizer, so maybe five or six minutes. The dinner's mostly done. Oh, wait. You know what? We need chairs. I'd rather have everyone at the table if possible.

CELINE You want all six of us at *that* table?

CARTER I think we have a leaf. Do we have a leaf?

JIM What's a leaf?

CARTER I just don't want to be all spread out around the room.

PAUL And I don't want to sit in that recliner again.

CARTER Jim, how about you and Celine go borrow some chairs from a neighbor. We just need three.

JIM Thank you. I might not have been able to do the math.

CARTER Well, you can't figure a tip.

JIM Touché. Who should I go to?

CARTER Mrs. McGonigle?

JIM Mrs. Mac? You want me to go ask Mrs. Mac for chairs, and you expect me back anytime soon? What if she gets to talking?

CARTER Hit her with a chair.

JIM Come on, Celine. Maybe you can protect me from Mrs. McGonigle. Or at least distract her while I get away. Have you ever tackled an elderly woman?

Jim and Celine exit, Celine looking a touch worried.

CARTER Okay, let me just finish up in here and we can all relax.

KAREN I think I'll use the bathroom before we get started.

CARTER Better than during.

Karen exits. Liz chuckles and shakes her head. She and Carter catch each other's eyes, and there's a smile. Carter exits.

PAUL That's nice.

LIZ What?

PAUL The way you look at Carter.

LIZ And how's that?

PAUL Like you miss him. A lot. How long have you two been separated?

LIZ We broke up eight months ago.

PAUL So the other relationship didn't work out?

LIZ *(slightly startled)* What "other" relationship?

PAUL Oh, I'm sorry—I just figured maybe in that time... I mean, you're very attractive.

LIZ Thank you.

PAUL So I assumed maybe you'd been seeing someone else and it didn't work out.

LIZ *(hesitant, moving away from the kitchen door)* Well, I did and it didn't. But I don't think this is the place to talk about it.

PAUL Did you have somewhere else in mind?

LIZ Oh, that was subtle.

PAUL Sorry. It's a reflex.

LIZ A come-on reflex. How charming.

PAUL It's all part of the game.

LIZ What game?

PAUL This game. Made you smile.

LIZ Yes you did. I'll give you that.

PAUL *(moving toward her)* So it didn't work out and now...what? Thinking of giving him a second chance?

Paul's phone rings. He doesn't go for it—he keeps looking at Liz.

LIZ Shouldn't you get that?

He takes out the phone, presses a button or two, puts it away.

PAUL I have voice mail. I'll get it later. So am I right?

LIZ I really shouldn't answer this.

PAUL But you will.

LIZ Things didn't work out with the other guy, and maybe I thought...maybe. (pause) That's what I thought.

PAUL So this other guy wasn't what you were looking for... (crossing to her) And maybe Carter's not what you're looking for?

LIZ Some days I don't know what I'm looking for.

PAUL (moving closer) We all feel that way sometimes. (Closer) It's not that unusual. But if I may, I'd suggest that maybe you're looking for something like this.

He leans in and kisses her, a hand on her face. She's not exactly kissing him back—it's more that she's getting kissed. A moment after their lips touch, Carter steps in from the kitchen with a platter of endive and goat cheese. He stares at them, in heartbroken shock. Karen comes out of Jim's bedroom. Almost at the same time, the front door opens and Jim and Celine enter, carrying chairs.

CELINE Oh!

This breaks Paul and Liz's kiss. At the same time, Karen storms across the room toward Carter. She grabs Carter by the face and lays a long, deep kiss on him. She breaks from him, and turns to glare at Paul. Liz is wide-eyed. There's a beat, then:

CARTER (still holding the tray in front of him) Goat cheese, anyone?

BLACKOUT

END ACT ONE

Interested in reading the rest? Contact me by e-mail at:
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