THE DEVIL'S FOOD

Written By

Rodriguez Fruitbat

rodriguezfruitbat@gmail.com

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INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - NIGHT

Flames leap off glowing wood coals to singe a RACK OF RIBS.

MATTHEW (32), the restaurant’s trim and impatient owner, hovers behind the counter.

MATTHEW
Chop, chop, people. We’ve got hungry customers out there.

TRE (29), an intensely focused and well-built grill chef, scoops the ribs off the grill and onto a plate.

TRE
All good, Matthew. Got ribs here!

CLAIRE, a petite salad chef barely in her 20s, grabs the plate and slaps on coleslaw, potatoes, and beans. Ultimate, down-home southern comfort food.

CLAIRE
Just the way you like it, Chef!

Claire hands the plate to ANGELO (32), the kitchen’s head chef, scruffy hair and a stained chef’s jacket. He brushes on rich, plum-colored barbecue sauce. Sets it on the counter.

ANGELO
Table five’s up!

JESS (28), a confident waitress sporting casual clothes and a dove tattoo, reaches for the plate. Pauses. Winks at Matthew.

JESS
Is Angelo changing his style?

ANGELO
Wait!

Angelo ladles on a mess of extra barbecue sauce.

ANGELO (CONT'D)
Send it.

Jess grabs the plate and hurries toward the dining room.

INT. RESTAURANT DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The place is a quarter-full with elderly DINERS. Walls covered in outdated decor. Not exactly a trendy hot spot.
A portrait on the wall features a younger Matthew, plump and happy, flanked by Angelo and Angelo’s Colombian grandmother ABUELA, proudly displaying a large platter of meats.

Jess serves the dish to OWEN (30s), a tall, unconventionally attractive customer seated by himself and wearing a pinstriped blazer over a red T-shirt.

JESS
This is worth the wait, I promise.

Owen looks down at his food. Leans back in his seat.

OWEN
Let me ask you something...
(chacks her name tag)
Jess? Are you happy serving this?

Owen wipes runaway barbecue sauce from the rim of the plate.

JESS
Trust me, when you taste--

OWEN
--Tell your chef that when I wait
this long for food, I want it
professional. Not this slop-house,
prison-style, clumsy mess.

Owen waves Jess’s concerned look aside, smiles.

OWEN (CONT'D)
It’s not your fault. I just want my
money’s worth.

Jess takes the plate, turns, and leaves.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jess sets the plate down hard on the counter.

JESS
Table five sent it back. He said
it’s...

Angelo looks up from his prep. Raises an eyebrow.

ANGELO
It’s what?

JESS
A clumsy... mess.
She cringes and waits for the explosion.

Angelo straightens up. A smile creeps onto his face... Then vanishes. He scrambles to remove his jacket.

    ANGELO
    Let me see this idiot!

    MATTHEW
    Whoa, whoa! Dial it back, Angelo.

    ANGELO
    Some maniac just called my food clumsy.

Matthew looks at the barbecue-covered plate.

    MATTHEW
    So re-dish it and send it back out.

Angelo picks up the plate. Drops it in the garbage.

    MATTHEW (CONT'D)
    That was four bucks worth of meat!

    ANGELO
    Clumsy mess, my butt. Tre, Another rack for the pretentious, no palette, insult-to-America snob.

    TRE
    Yes, Chef.

Angelo grabs a clean dish and makes sure it’s spotless.

Tre lifts his cleaver then catches Owen staring in through the little window of the kitchen door. Looks back down at the cutting board. Instead of a rack of ribs, he’s holding down a writhing THREE-HEADED SNAKE with huge fangs.

    TRE (CONT'D)
    Agh!

He chops the snake! Looks around at the others.

    TRE (CONT'D)
    Did you all see--

Everyone stares at Tre in shock.

He looks back down. There is no three-headed snake; just a rack of ribs and his severed thumb.
INT. HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

Matthew sits between a LARGE LADY with serious sinus issues and an angry BIKER DUDE holding a bloody rag to his head. Tries not to make body contact with either of them.

Matthew jumps out of his seat as Tre walks in with his bandaged hand held up.

TRE
They sewed it back on.

MATTHEW
Hey. At least it wasn’t your chopping hand, right?

Tre’s eyes water.

MATTHEW (CONT’D)
Let’s get you home.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - NIGHT

Service is over for the night. Claire finishes scrubbing grease off the grill.

Angelo places leftover bread and veggies into a cardboard box. Saves the last three buns for plates of pulled pork.

Matthew enters. Tired.

MATTHEW
Where is everyone?

ANGELO
Home. Slow night. Jess said she’ll see you for coffee in the morning.

CLaire
How’s Tre?

MATTHEW
Great. Really good. Except for chopping his thumb off and getting it sewn back on. He seemed pretty bummed about that.

ANGELO
Who’s going to cover the grill?

MATTHEW
Oh, he’ll be back on Monday.
CLAIRE
You’re not giving him any time off?

Matthew shrugs.

MATTHEW
He’s got tomorrow off.

CLAIRE
We all do. It’s Sunday.

MATTHEW
Who am I to tell him what to do?
He’s got his thumb back on. So...

Angelo carries two plates of food out the back door.

EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Angelo hands one plate to a HOMELESS MAN.

HOMELESS MAN
Bless you.

Angelo places the other on the ground for a hungry alley cat. Pats its head and heads back inside.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

MATTHEW
Why do you do that?

ANGELO
Because that little guy’s irresistible.

Matthew shakes the box of food.

MATTHEW
No, I mean give all our food away every Saturday night.

ANGELO
I don’t want it to go to waste.

MATTHEW
So freeze it, like a normal chef.

Claire removes her apron and hangs it up.
CLAIRE
As much as I love watching you old ladies bicker...

ANGELO
Get some sleep, Claire. Great job tonight.

CLAIRE
Thanks, Chef.

Claire heads out.

Angelo sits up on the counter. Breaks his bread roll in half and hands a piece to Matthew. Pats the box of food.

ANGELO
Do you know how many meals this will make at the shelter?

MATTHEW
I know exactly how many. I count bread rolls just to stay afloat.

Matthew uncorks a bottle of red house wine and pours two glasses. Hands one to Angelo.

ANGELO
Well, selling leftovers won’t help. I can tell you that.

MATTHEW
We have to do something. I’m barely hanging on here.

ANGELO
Says the guy who just bought a new car.

MATTHEW
A new...? It’s a used Astro Van. I didn’t invest my life and all my savings into this restaurant for a frikkin’ Astro Van. There are restaurants in town that are wastes of space, and their owners drive BMWs. I should be driving BMWs!

ANGELO
At what cost? Frozen food? We’re not savages.

Matthew holds up a piece of pork. Sauce drips onto the plate.
MATTHEW
That customer was right, you know?
This is a mess.

Angelo snags the meat from Matthew and pops it into his mouth. Chews.

ANGELO
A delicious mess.

MATTHEW
I’m serious. Would a garnish kill you? Maybe, like, a dash of color?

ANGELO
This isn’t hipster cuisine. It’s simple, fresh, and classic food.

MATTHEW
It’s outdated.

ANGELO
Barbecue has survived through every culture in history. Even God loves it. “So heap on the wood and kindle the fire. Cook the meat well, mixing in the spices; and let the bones be charred.” Ezekiel twenty-four, verse ten.

Matthew sighs. Defeated. Finishes his wine.

MATTHEW
Who am I to argue with God, right?

Angelo slaps him on the shoulder.

ANGELO
Come to my abuela’s for dinner tomorrow. It’ll remind you of our roots.

MATTHEW
Can’t. I promised Jess a night out.

ANGELO
Bring her along. She’ll love it.

MATTHEW
Last time I ate there, I had to spend a week in the gym.
ANGELO
Too late... I’m posting it.
(types on his phone)
Done. You and Jess are coming.

MATTHEW
Your abuela’s on Facebook?

ANGELO
Everyone’s abuela’s on Facebook.
It’s all abuelas on there now.

EXT. ABUELA’S HOUSE – NIGHT

Matthew and Jess walk up to the front of a modest townhouse. Matthew rings the doorbell.

MATTHEW
A quick meal and we’re done, but remember, eat everything...
EVERYTHING! Angelo’s cousin left some salad on the plate once and he still hasn’t lived it down.

Angelo answers the door, super casual in a cardigan.

Matthew heads straight past him to ABUELA, Angelo’s sweet Colombian grandmother from the portrait at the restaurant.

INT. ABUELA’S FOYER – NIGHT

Matthew hugs Abuela. Kisses both cheeks.

MATTHEW
Abuela! Wow, you gorgeous thing, you don’t look a day over forty.

Abuela smiles and brushes him off. Shy. She shakes her head when Matthew hands her a bottle of wine.

ABUELA
Oh, no, no. It’s okay.

MATTHEW
I insist. Thank you for having us.

ABUELA
Gracias.

MATTHEW
Mucho gusto. This is Jess.
Abuela pulls Jess in for kisses on the cheeks.

    ABUELA
    He’s so full of sugar, isn’t he?

    JESS
    Sure is.

INT. ABUELA’S DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Matthew, Jess, and Angelo sit in a cramped room that hasn’t been updated in 25 years. A crucifix hangs on the wall. The judging eyes of Jesus stare down at Matthew.

Matthew sits up straight and fixes his collar.

Large bowls of rice, beans, and salad crowd the table. Abuela carries a huge platter of Colombian fried chicken to the table. Heads back to the kitchen.

    MATTHEW
    She knows about my diet, right?

    ANGELO
    One meal won’t kill you.

    JESS
    (laughing)
    I’m the one who has to hear him moan about feeling fat.

Abuela returns with a plate of fried plantains and Matthew’s bottle of wine.

    MATTHEW
    Oh, no. The wine was for you.

Abuela waves his objection off. Motions for them to start.

    MATTHEW (CONT’D)
    Aren’t you going to eat with us?

    ABUELA
    It’s for you, skinny boy. Eat. Eat.

    MATTHEW
    Please?

Jess kicks him under the table as Abuela heads back into the kitchen. The sound of a Colombian TV drama turns on.

They dish up. Matthew takes a huge bite.
ANGELO
Forgetting something?

MATTHEW
(mouth full)
Oh shit, sorry. Uh, thanks for the meat, good God, let’s eat.

Angelo shakes his head as Matthew and Jess dig in.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Oh man. I missed this.

JESS
Wow. Incredible.

Angelo stabs a piece of meat and holds it up.

ANGELO
Simple. Unpretentious. Delicious. This is what people need.

MATTHEW
Sure. But we’re not going to get rich serving Grandma food.

ANGELO
Who said we have to get rich?
You’ll do fine with an ounce of faith and patience.

Matthew continues to eat. Talks with his mouth full.

MATTHEW
I’m sick of patience.

He glances up at Jesus. Looks away.

INT. RESTAURANT DINING ROOM - NIGHT

LEWIS (24), the overweight and scruffy but lovable host, pops several dinner mints into his mouth and discards the wrappers onto a large pile on his counter.

Lewis leans down to greet a lovely old ROMANIAN HUSBAND and WIFE. Age seems to have shriveled them to a smaller size.

LEWIS
Let’s see if we can squeeze you in.

He checks the dining room. It’s not even a third full.
LEWIS (CONT'D)
And... yes we can. Right this way.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - NIGHT

Tre is back at the grill, careful with his bandaged hand. Angelo and Claire prepare dishes.

Matthew hovers around behind them, getting in the way.

ANGELO
Excuse me.

Angelo reaches past Matthew to grab a plate. Cuts a large piece of black forest chocolate cake, adds whipped cream and a strawberry.

Matthew sneaks in to drizzle chocolate sauce on the plate.

ANGELO (CONT'D)
The chocolate-frosted chocolate cake wasn’t chocolaty enough?

MATTHEW
I’m adding some character.

Matthew reaches for a powder shaker.

ANGELO
And now you’ve got the chocolate dust. Great.

Angelo shakes his head. Sets the dessert up on the counter.

ANGELO (CONT'D)
Dessert for table six!

Jess comes to whisk it away as Matthew dusts it.

JESS
Ooh. Fancy.

Angelo tries to focus on his cooking as Matthew tosses a sprig of parsley on top of a bowl of chili.

ANGELO
That’s it! You finish the orders.

Angelo throws a towel down.

MATTHEW
Where are you going?
ANGELO
For a walk.

MATTHEW
You can’t walk out in the middle of service!

ANGELO
Don’t see why not. Seems like we’ve got plenty of cooks in the kitchen.

MATTHEW
You don’t have to take this so personally. I’m just trying to improve the presentation.

ANGELO
Improve the... My food’s not good enough? By all means, improve away.

Angelo removes his chef’s jacket.

MATTHEW
Angelo...

ANGELO
You know. I’m glad you’re taking an interest in the food. I haven’t had a Monday night off in years.

Tre and Claire pause to watch the argument.

MATTHEW
You leave like this, you’re not welcome back.

Angelo stares at Matthew. Stunned.

ANGELO
After all these years? After my family basically raised you like my brother? I helped you build this restaurant from the ground up.

MATTHEW
Then stay, but I need you to swallow your pride and help make this restaurant a success. It’s my ass on the line, and I’m sick of just scraping by.

Angelo throws his jacket on the counter. Storms out through the back door.
Matthew stamps off the opposite way to the dining room.

**CLaire**

So... Tre and I are cooking everything then?

Jess tries to stop Matthew, but he brushes past.

**INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT - LATER**

Matthew, now wearing a suit, weaves around the tables.

**SARAH (22),** a sweet but flustered waitress, barges past and bumps into him. Matthew saves her plate from flipping.

**SARAH**

Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry. I totally forgot my bread.

**MATTHEW**

Save the sorries for later. Can’t let the seniors go hungry, right?

Matthew stops at the Romanian Husband and Wife’s table.

**MATTHEW (CONT'D)**

How are we doing? Can I offer you something from our wine menu?

**ROMANIAN HUSBAND**

We’re tired and hungry.

Matthew looks back at the kitchen. Muffled shouts come from Claire and Tre as they scramble to keep up.


**MATTHEW**

We’re juuuust a bit short staffed tonight. Your food will be right up. I promise.

An **IMPATIENT FATHER** with a family of SIX waves at Matthew.

Lewis approaches to whisper in Matthew’s ear. Points to crabby old **DELORES (86)** who is poking at her food.

**LEWIS**

Delores wants to talk to you about her pork chops.
MATTHEW
Tell her I’ll be right there.

The Impatient Father waves his napkin in the air.

Sarah trips on her way back out of the kitchen and drops her order. Dishes crash to the floor.

A baby cries. The Impatient Man gets up to leave.

DELORES
Yoo-hoo. Matthew, dear?

Matthew gives up. Turns and walks straight to the...

INT. DINING ROOM BAR - NIGHT

KEITH (52), an older, but still innocent and energetic bartender, hands a Manhattan on the rocks to a PATRON.

KEITH
Are you sure? I honestly thought Delaware was a city.

Matthew plops onto a stool. Interrupts.

MATTHEW
Vodka soda on the rocks.

Matthew reaches over and grabs a handful of pretzels from the surprised Patron’s snack bowl.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Actually, hold the rocks. And the soda.

Jess gives Keith a questioning look as she rushes around. Keith shrugs as he pours Matthew a shot of vodka.

LATER

Matthew stacks a fifth shot glass on top of a pyramid.

MATTHEW
Another.

KEITH
You sure, boss?

MATTHEW
I busted my butt for years on this restaurant, and it’s going nowhere. (MORE)
MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Just once, I wish I could be successful.

Keith pours the shot, which Matthew promptly downs.

HAPPY CUSTOMER (O.S.)
Now that looks delicious!

Matthew perks up. Spins on his stool to see Jess serving two old LADIES. The food looks different.

Matthew stumbles over to the table. Kneels for a closer view.

The food is immaculately presented. Instead of a full rack, one plate just has a few individual ribs with the meat cut in rings around the bone, resting on a bed of crisped onions.

The other plate has four small, round potato cakes, each topped with a mound of different pulled meats. Barbecue sauce decorates the white space in an intricate pattern.

Matthew looks at Jess, who points to the kitchen. Matthew heads in that direction. Passes Sarah, who carries out two more equally impressive dishes.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Matthew enters to find Owen, the former customer, behind the counter in a fancy red and black chef’s uniform. Steam rises around him.

Owen leans down to dress several plates like an artist.

OWEN
Claire, do you know how to make an apple pie?

Claire hesitates, confused by the whole situation.

CLAIRE
Yes?

Owen pulls down a cast iron appetizer dish from a shelf.

OWEN
Fantastic. Prep me some apple slices. I’ll teach you how to make it irresistible.
(spoils Sarah)
What’s your name, hun?

SARAH
Um, Sarah.
OWEN
Lovely. Grab me a bottle of bourbon from the bar.
(To Matthew)
It’s Matthew, right?

Matthew nods, dumbfounded.

OWEN (CONT’D)
Go have a seat in the dining room.

MATTHEW
But--

OWEN
--Relax. It’s all under control. The last orders are almost out.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Matthew waits at a table. Still confused.

The last diner enthusiastically shakes Lewis’s hand, and thanks him on the way out.

The kitchen door bursts open. Owen walks out with a cast-iron dish on a platter. Blue and orange FLAMES rise.

He sets a perfectly cooked apple pie topped with a ball of vanilla ice cream before Matthew. Creamy rivulets run into a sizzling caramelized bourbon sauce.

Owen WAVES HIS HAND, and the FLAMES die out.

MATTHEW
That’s... amazing.

Try it.

OWEN
(pats his stomach)
I can’t. I’m on a sugar ban.

OWEN
Just one bite. Aren’t you curious?

Matthew digs his fork in. Takes a bite. His eyes glisten.

MATTHEW
Incredible.
**OWEN**
Would you put that on your menu?

**MATTHEW**
(take another bite)
I’d love to. But our customers
don’t buy the pricier desserts.

**OWEN**
Oh, believe me, they’ll pay. Want
to know the best part?
(leans in)
It’s ninety percent apples, flour,
butter, and sugar. The cheapest
ingredients in the kitchen. And a
tiny bit of this to give it a kick.

Owen sets the bottle of bourbon on the table. By the time
Owen finishes speaking, Matthew finishes the dessert.

**MATTHEW**
Who are you?

Owen reaches out his hand.

**OWEN**
Name’s Owen.

Matthew shakes his hand.

**MATTHEW**
But how... Why are you here?

**OWEN**
I just saw an opportunity.

Owen pours two glasses of bourbon. Raises his for a toast.

**OWEN (CONT'D)**
What do you say? Cheers to a
successful night?

Matthew clinks his glass with Owen’s. They drink.

**MATTHEW**
I don’t even know what to say. You
saved my butt tonight.

**OWEN**
I know.

Owen stares at Matthew. Waits for a response.

Matthew finally laughs.
MATTHEW
You’re like a gift from heaven.

OWEN
I wouldn’t say that. But I would say this place could be the hottest place in town if you want it to be.

MATTHEW
Yeah? And what would that take?

OWEN
Just ask for my help.

MATTHEW
Done. You’re hired.

OWEN
Don’t you want to know my terms?

MATTHEW
Of course. Sorry. What do you want?

OWEN
Equal partners. Sign over fifty percent of the restaurant, and we’re bound together. What do you say? Let’s do it.

Matthew gulps his drink and sets down the empty glass. Looks around the dining room.

MATTHEW
I... I put my soul into this restaurant. I didn’t even give Angelo an ownership share.

OWEN
And where is he now? It’s your choice. Do you want to scrape by, feeding crusty old folk on the way to their graves, or do you want to be rich?

MATTHEW
Look, I’d love to hire you. I’ll even pay you twice what I gave Angelo, but this restaurant is my life. I can’t just sign it over.

Owen stands up.

OWEN
Call me when you change your mind.
Owen hands Matthew a black-on-black business card. Walks out.

EXT. RESTAURANT - DAY

Matthew and Jess cross the park with two takeout coffees and head toward the restaurant. An ugly, weathered restaurant sign above the door reads:

"MATTHEW"

Matthew unlocks the door.

JESS
Just call Angelo. You know we can’t do this without him.

MATTHEW
How hard can lunch be?

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - DAY

Tre barbecues burger patties for the lunch menu while Claire preps soup and Matthew assembles burgers. The bun falls off a tower of meat, lettuce, tomato, and bacon.

MATTHEW
How the hell are these supposed to stay together?

Claire stabs a long toothpick through the burger.

CLAIRE
Too much lettuce. Too much everything, really.

MATTHEW
But it looks fantastic.

TRE
How’s anyone supposed to eat it?

Jess brings a dish back.

JESS
Table twelve asked for a rare.

MATTHEW
Come on, Tre.

TRE
You told me a medium.
MATTHEW
No, it says right here.

Matthew shuffles through discarded tickets.

TRE
Here’s the rare burger.

MATTHEW
Yeah, that’s... Okay. No problem. Cook a new rare and we’ll send the medium with table three’s order.

Matthew scrapes a side salad from the dish.

CLaire
You can’t re-serve a burger that’s already been out.

MATTHEW
Fine! Rush on two burgers; one rare, one medium. I’ll get the fries.

Matthew grabs the fry basket handle.

MATTHEW (CONT’D)
Agh!

CLaire
Careful, the handle’s hot.

Matthew wipes sweat from his forehead. Turns and bumps into a trash can, knocking it over.

EXT. RESTAURANT BACK ALLEY – DAY

The back door flings open. Matthew throws the whole garbage can out into the alley. Food scatters across the ground. The alley cat jumps out of the way. Matthew SLAMS the door.

The cat returns to eat scraps.

Owen leans against the wall at the entrance to the alley. Hands in his pockets. A grin on his face.

INT. DINING ROOM – DAY

The service is down to two tables finishing their lunches. Matthew and Jess sit at the bar, drinking pints with Keith.
KEITH
I’m sorry, man. I have to agree with Jess. We need Angelo back.

MATTHEW
He chose to leave.

JESS
Did he really, though? Cause, I was there, and it sounded kind of like you gave him an ultimatum.

MATTHEW
Whatever.

JESS
You’re acting like a kid who just got in a fight with his BFF.

MATTHEW
Ex-BFF.

KEITH
You know. The one thing I’ve learned about relationships is that everything’s always your fault. Swallow your pride and say sorry.

JESS
I hate to say it, but I think Keith’s actually right for once.

Matthew sighs.

MATTHEW
You all suck.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN – NIGHT
Matthew watches with his arms folded across his chest as Angelo walks back in and picks up his chef’s coat and hat.

The kitchen and wait staff CHEER.

CLAIRE
Welcome back!

TRE
Hey, brother.

ANGELO
I missed you guys.
Matthew puts up his hands for quiet.

MATTHEW
Okay, okay. We’re all glad Angelo is back. But I want to be clear. Things are going to change around here. I’ve seen what irresistible food looks like, and that’s what I want to serve. And the organic crap has to go. Too expensive. You know what diners want in their food? Butter and salt and spice.

Angelo crosses his arms and glares at Matthew.

ANGELO
I thought you wanted me back?

MATTHEW
And I do. But on my terms. This is my restaurant, and we’ll run it like a real business.

Angelo holds out his chef’s jacket and hat and drops them to the floor. The staff GROANS as he walks right back out.

Lewis pokes his head into the kitchen.

LEWIS
Customers arriving. Anyone want to serve them?

As Sarah and Jess head to the dining room, Jess looks back at Matthew. Disappointed.

INT. DINING ROOM – NIGHT

Matthew rushes out the front door past a line of customers.

EXT. STREET – NIGHT – CONTINUOUS

Matthew runs across the street to the park. Stands beneath a streetlight and pulls out Owen’s black business card. Squints to read the numbers as he dials his cell.

OWEN (V.O.)
(over the phone)
Matthew.
MATTHEW
Owen, okay, look. People are already asking for the food you served last night. Now, I can’t just give you half my restaurant--

OWEN (V.O.)
--Well, nice to hear from you--

MATTHEW
--Wait. Wait. I’ll give you forty-nine percent. That’s almost half. But I keep control. Okay?

Matthew waits. Silence from the other end of the phone.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Please? I need you.

OWEN
I’ll be right over.

INT. BACK OFFICE - NIGHT

Owen and Matthew crowd into Owen’s tiny office. Owen unrolls a single-paged legal document. Matthew looks it over.

MATTHEW
How did you get this so quickly?

OWEN
Wonders of the internet. Download a standard agreement, fill in names and numbers, and Bob’s our uncle.

MATTHEW
Looks pretty basic.

Owen hands Matthew a pen.

OWEN
I know, right? Initial here where it says forty-nine percent...
(Matthew initials)
...and here, by the name of the restaurant.

Matthew initials by the name “Matthew.”

OWEN (CONT'D)
And... sign and date here.
As soon as Matthew signs his name, a hot red glow shines in from the kitchen. Matthew jumps and looks through the window. Flames leap up from a grease-filled frying pan. The smoke alarm goes off. Tre dunks a towel in water and throws it over the pan to douse the flames.

EXT. STREET - DAY

A beautiful morning. The sun shines. Birds chirp. Kids play. Matthew and Jess emerge from the local coffee shop with their coffees. They stroll across the park.

MATTHEW
You know, if we keep having crowds like last night, we’ll finally be able to buy a place together.

JESS
A nice condo down by the river.

MATTHEW
Maybe even a house.

Matthew’s hope-filled smile disappears.

MATTHEW (CONT’D)
What the...?

A freshly printed banner hangs over Matthew’s old restaurant sign. Red flames on a black background frame the new name:

“BRYMSTONE”

Matthew runs to the front door.

INT. RESTAURANT - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Matthew enters to find the restaurant staff lined up behind a table, looking tired and confused.

Owen places a grey slate with three meat dishes before them.

MATTHEW
Brymstone?!?

OWEN
Matthew! Just in time. Jess, please join the group.
JESS
What’s he doing here?

MATTHEW
Meet our new chef.

Jess joins the rest of the confused staff while Matthew steps up to Owen’s side.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
What are you doing here so early? I wanted to tell everyone first.

OWEN
You wanted change, and here it is.

Owen proudly shows off three dishes. Points to a tall, open-faced burger. The sides have been trimmed to a squared shape.

OWEN (CONT'D)
Craft-style, Kobe beef burger topped with onions, a deep-fried Camembert wheel, and back bacon.

KEITH
Looks like a fancy heart-attack.

LEWIS
I think it looks awesome.

Owen smiles. Moves to the next dish.

OWEN
I knew hungry-boy would like it.
Next, we have our delicious hoof-to-table, gluten-free, Sinful Meatloaf topped with catsup, colorful sprigs of parsley, yellow peppers, and grilled okra.

It’s a cylinder of mashed potatoes and four wedges of meat (reclaimed from the squared-off burger.)

TRE
That’s just hamburger slices.

OWEN
Keen eye. You just know Matthew was wondering where the extra meat the burger eaters paid for went. Well, here it is. Total additional food cost, a buck-fifty. Price on the menu, eighteen dollars. Push this one. It’s almost pure profit.
Matthew grins. Tre rolls his eyes.

SARAH
The brisket looks raw and burnt at the same time.

She points to a pile of meat. Small-cut strips, charred black on the outside, but so rare inside they almost glow red.

OWEN
I love skeptics. Blackened, sous vide smoked meat. Everyone taste.

CLAIRED
I’ll get forks.

OWEN
This is meat. We’re carnivores! Eat it with your fingers for a true primeval experience. Dig in.

Everyone grabs a piece and tastes. Their eyes light up.

LEWIS
So good.

OWEN
Come on, someone with a palette.

MATTHEW
It’s amazing. People will line up for this.

OWEN
Exactly! That’s why we’ll charge a fortune for it.

KEITH
Okay, I’ll play the idiot here, but... this doesn’t taste like beef. What is it?

A hint of irritation flashes across Owen’s eyes. He smiles.

OWEN
If you don’t know, I’m not telling.

KEITH
Lamb?

OWEN
I more of a goat person than lamb. No, this, my friends, is the taste of success.

(MORE)
OWEN (CONT'D)
The old, boring home-style cooking is gone. These dishes will be on our new menu tonight, and I’ve invited several important guests for their debut. Are you all ready to blow this town away?

The staff nods with excitement as they greedily finish off the rest of the meat.

OWEN (CONT'D)
One more thing. We’re closing for lunch today. This stodgy old dump needs a complete overhaul.

SARAH
Hold on. I need those tips.

OWEN
A small sacrifice now will reap rewards tonight. Trust me. Now let’s drag this place kicking and screaming into this century. Starting with that depressing old portrait.

Owen walks over and takes down the portrait of Matthew, Angelo, and Abuela.

OWEN (CONT'D)
Come on, man! Help me out here.

Matthew grabs one side of the portrait. They walk it outside. The staff follows out of curiosity.

EXT. RESTAURANT - DAY

Owen and Matthew step onto the sidewalk. Staff behind them.

MATTHEW
I’ve had this portrait on the wall for years.

OWEN
Two of these people don’t even work here. Do you want a change or not?

Owen sighs. Nods. They swing the portrait together.

OWEN (CONT'D)
One... Two... THREE!
The painting soars through the air, lands in the street, and is promptly crushed under the tires of a restaurant supply moving truck as it comes to a stop.

Owen CLAPS his hands and laughs. Shakes Matthew’s shoulder.

A smile edges onto Matthew’s face.

INT. DINING ROOM – LATER

Sarah and Jess paint over the rustic, Mediterranean-colored walls with bold, red and black paint.

Keith and Tre place tall-backed chairs around modern tables.

Owen hangs a sensual painting of two apples in the spot where the portrait used to be.

    OWEN
    What do you think?

    MATTHEW
    It’s crooked.

    OWEN
    Crooked is the new straight.

Claire pokes her head out of the kitchen.

    CLAIRE
    Matthew! I need you. Now.

Owen nudges Matthew and winks.

    OWEN
    Mr. Big Time restaurant owner.
    Already the object of desire.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN – DAY

Matthew finds Claire pointing at two burly MOVERS as they install a stack of microwave ovens at her station.

    CLAIRE
    How am I supposed to cook with these monstrosities taking up half my station?

    MATTHEW
    I’ll talk to--
OWEN (O.S.)
--Like ‘em?

Matthew jumps. Turns to see Owen standing right behind him.

OWEN (CONT'D)
Top-of-the-line flash heating systems.

CLAIRE
I am not microwaving food.

OWEN
Call it molecular gastronomy. Claire, I know you’re a great cook, but when was the last time this kitchen handled a full dining room?

Claire shrugs.

OWEN (CONT'D)
Well, tonight we’re booked for two full turnovers. Packed. I guarantee that if you’re still standing by the end of the shift, you’ll be making love to those machines.

MATTHEW
I don’t know. Angelo always said--

Owen grabs a large turnip.

OWEN
Angelo can stick this turnip up his greasy old butt. Trust me, with a genius like Claire working her culinary magic, people will think they’re at frikkin’ Heston’s.

CLAIRE
Ridiculous.

Claire turns to hide her blushing cheeks.

A toilette flushes. Lewis walks out of the staff bathroom.

LEWIS
No one go in there. For your own good.

He grabs two bread rolls on his way to the dining room.
OWEN
That kid eats like a beagle.
Exactly how attached are you--

JESS (O.S.)
--Matthew!

Matthew looks. Jess pokes her head into the kitchen. Motions for him to follow then disappears back into the dining room.

MATTHEW
Dear Lord. What now?

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY
Matthew comes out, followed by Owen.
Jess, Sarah, Lewis, and Keith all gather around a table to inspect clothing in a cardboard box.
Jess pulls out a tiny skirt.

JESS
Is this for a child?
Sarah holds up a button down white shirt that seems a couple sizes too small for her.

OWEN
Oh good. You found the uniforms.

JESS
Uniforms?
Jess looks at Matthew, who shrugs.
Owen checks his watch. Claps his hands.

OWEN
It’s almost go time. Everyone get dressed so we can check you out.

No one moves.

OWEN (CONT'D)
Which is it, people? Do you want to help Matthew with his dream, or watch him slowly waste away in miserable failure?

Owen gives a charming smile.

Matthew shoots Jess a pleading glance. Mouths “please.”
JESS
Come on, guys, let’s get dressed.

OWEN
Believe me. You’re all going to be smoking hot. With our new uniforms and menu, this town will be all over us like donkeys on a waffle.

Owen snaps his fingers.

INT. DINING ROOM – NIGHT

Owen and Matthew watch from the bar. Dishes CLINK, and happy CHATTER fills the packed room.

Keith, dapper but uncomfortable in his flashy new suit, serves them two martinis.

Owen lifts his martini glass to Matthew.

OWEN
To success.

Matthew clinks his glass against Owen’s.

MATTHEW
Success.

Sarah serves a nearby table, almost spilling out of her undersized shirt as she bends over. Glances back at Matthew.

INT. LOBBY – NIGHT

A hungry crowd waits for seats.

Lewis helplessly stares at the table map. Pops a dinner mint in his mouth and chews. The buttons of his tight dress-shirt threaten to pop off his bulky midsection.

Jess rushes over to Lewis.

JESS
Table fourteen is ready.

A BLOND BUSINESS DUDE nudges his DRUNKEN BUSINESS BUDDY. Their eyes molest Jess.

BLOND BUSINESS DUDE
I think we found our new spot.
DRUNKEN BUSINESS BUDDY
What’s your name, Sweetie?

JESS
It’s not ‘Sweetie.’

BLOND BUSINESS DUDE
Ooh. She’s a fiery one.

He ribs his Drunken Business Buddy.

Jess adjusts her low cut shirt to cover her tight skirt, but the effort only reveals more cleavage. She leaves.

LEWIS
Right this way, gentleman.

DRUNKEN BUSINESS BUDDY
We want her as our waitress.

LEWIS
Sorry, her section’s full.

BLOND BUSINESS DUDE
Figure it out. Idiot.

DRUNKEN BUSINESS BUDDY
Yeah, give us the slutty waitress, fat ass.

Lewis turns red. Adjusts the stack of menus. Then tackles the Drunken Business Buddy.

EXT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Lewis stands outside in his street clothes with Jess and Matthew. Matthew hands Lewis his backpack.

MATTHEW
Sorry, you gave me no choice.

LEWIS
You always have a choice.


JESS
Are you going to be all right?

LEWIS
Sure. I’d do it again.
They don’t notice Owen watching from around the corner. He turns and hands two wads of cash to the Business Dudes.

JESS
You’re a good man, Lewis.

Jess kisses Lewis on the cheek before heading back inside. The door shuts behind her.

EXT. RESTAURANT - DAY
Night turns to day.
The front door opens. Owen escorts Matthew out onto the sidewalk and points.

Matthew whistles at a red sports car parked out front.

OWEN
Like it?

MATTHEW
Impressive.

OWEN
A six-point-two liter, supercharged V8 engine with seven-hundred and fifty horsepower. Give her a spin.

Owen holds out a set of keys.

MATTHEW
Wait. That’s yours?!

Owen laughs. Slaps Matthew’s back.

OWEN
Don’t be so shocked. Stick with me, and you’ll be driving your own in no time.

Matthew beams as he grabs the keys. They get in and peel away down the street.

INT. LUXURY CLOTHING STORE - DAY
The car skids to a stop outside. Matthew and Owen climb out, laughing. The door CHIMES as they enter the shop.

KEYLYNN (25), the store’s attendant greets them in an expensive, sleek, black pantsuit and high heels.
KEYLYNN
Owen. So good to see you.

OWEN
Keylynn. Looking lovely as ever.

Owen kisses her cheeks.

OWEN (CONT'D)
Allow me to introduce my new business partner, Matthew. Give him the full treatment.

KEYLYNN
Right this way, sir.

She winks seductively at Matthew then turns and walks toward the back, slender hips swaying.

MATTHEW
I can’t afford this.

OWEN
Relax. The owner owes me.

LATER

Matthew stands in front of a mirror wearing a shirt and suit coat, but no pants while Keylynn kneels in front and runs a measuring tape up to his crotch to measure his inseam.

MATTHEW
How much is this going to cost?

KEYLYNN
Seventeen hundred and fifty.

MATTHEW
I thought you knew the owner?

OWEN
How do you think we’re getting this fantastic deal? Matthew, listen. If you want to be successful, people have to believe you are successful. You’ve got to spend to trend.

Owen straightens Matthew’s suit jacket. They both admire him in the mirror.
OWEN (CONT'D)
But listen. That’s not the real reason we’re here. I believe you’re short one gluttonous host?

MATTHEW
I still feel bad about firing him.

OWEN
You did what you had to do.

Keylynn finishes measuring. Checks out Matthew’s butt.

KEYLYNN
Not bad.

OWEN
Isn’t he a treat?

KEYLYNN
Delicious.

OWEN
Tell Allen you’re done here.
There’s a new hot spot in town.

Keylynn smiles.

INT. SPORTS CAR - DAY

Owen waits for Matthew squeeze into the passenger seat with his bags of new clothes.

OWEN
We need to talk about risk. No one has ever made it to the top by taking the safe road.

MATTHEW
I take risks.

OWEN
Please. You’d have bought your suit at Walmart if I hadn’t made you come here. Now, I’ve got a plan to take us to the next level. But I need you with me. Can you do it?

MATTHEW
Of course. I’m ready.
OWEN
Okay, so here it is. Valentine’s Day is the biggest day of the year for restaurants. We’re going to hold a banquet so spectacular, that Brymstone will be the ONLY destination in town for the elite. Politicians, stars, crazy rich Asians... Just do everything I say, and they’ll be fighting tooth and nail to get in. Do you want it?

MATTHEW
More than anything.

OWEN
Fantastic. No backing out. No baby steps. Everything we do builds to Valentine’s day. Agreed?

MATTHEW
Let’s do it.

Owen turns the key. The car’s engine roars to life. He puts his sunglasses on then stomps the gas. Smoke billows from the tires. They take off down the street, weaving through oncoming traffic.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - DAY

Rock music blasts on the radio. Sunlight spills in through the back door. Tre and Claire sweat in the hot kitchen while prepping sauces for the evening service.

Tre peeks outside and spots Owen smoking a cigarette while a shady DELIVERY GUY unloads boxes from the red restaurant supply truck and stacks them by the wall.

Matthew emerges from the office.

MATTHEW
Where’s Owen?

TRE
Out back.

Matthew sees him. Calls.

MATTHEW
Owen! Got a second?

Owen hands a stack of cash to the Delivery Guy. Flicks his cigarette and comes in. Follows Matthew to his office.
INT. OFFICE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Matthew sits back down behind his desk.

    OWEN
    Problem?

Owen shuffles through receipts.

    MATTHEW
    I keep going over these numbers, but they don’t make sense. Our profit is up four hundred percent.

    OWEN
    So what’s the problem?

    MATTHEW
    How’s this even possible?

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - DAY

Tre watches the red truck drive away. Checks the office to make sure Owen is still busy with Matthew.

Heads to the door and steps outside.

EXT. ALLEY - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Flies buzz around a stack of stained cardboard boxes. Tre sniffs and wrinkles his nose.

Flips the lid of a box open. A bag of raw chicken leaks slimy liquid. He holds his nose. Opens another box filled with raw cuts of unidentifiable meat all jumbled up together.

Tre spots a hoof. Gags and stumbles back. Bumps into Owen.

    TRE
    What the hell is this?

    OWEN
    That’s tonight’s dinner. How about using those muscles of yours to load it into the walk-in?

    TRE
    I’m not touching this garbage!

    OWEN
    You’ll touch what you’re overpaid to touch.
TRE
We’ll see what Matthew has to say about that.

OWEN
Now hold on--

Owen tries to block Tre, but Tre shoves him back and points his finger in Owen’s face.

TRE
Don’t you touch me.

Owen grabs Tre’s bandaged thumb and twists with surprising strength. Tre goes weak and drops to his knees.

Owen looms over him. His eyes turn red. His voice deepens.

OWEN
It’s time for you to leave.

Tre looks up in fear. Nods his head.

OWEN (CONT’D)
Say it.

Owen stares into Tre’s soul, mesmerizing him.

TRE
It’s time for me to leave. Tell Matthew it was nice knowing him.

Owen lets go.

Tre stands up. Removes his apron and hurries away.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN – DAY

Owen enters, smiling.

OWEN
Clair, congratulations. You’re the lead tonight. I’ll take the grill.

INT. DINING ROOM – NIGHT

The Romanian Husband and Wife wait in the lobby.

Keylynn looks straight past them at a hip, young BEARDED COUPLE dressed in trendy clothes.
KEYLYNN
Right this way, please.

ROMANIAN HUSBAND
Excuse me. We’ve been waiting for half an hour.

KEYLYNN
You should have made a reservation.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN – NIGHT

Various meats sizzle on the grill. Owen flips a steak and grease flames leap up. He moves with the grace of a dancer. Whatever the origin of the meat, it all looks amazing now.

Claire rushes around preparing the final dishes.

CLAIRE
Order up!

Sarah runs by and scoops up two plates.

Owen looks up from the grill to see Matthew staring at him. Lifts up a rack of ribs with tongs for a good sniff.

OWEN
Can you smell the money? You should have trimmed the fat earlier.

MATTHEW
Not everyone is happy.

OWEN
Oh, yeah?

MATTHEW
Delores wants to know why we’re charging twice as much for half the food.

OWEN
We’re doing Delores a favor. Have you seen that big old butt of hers?

MATTHEW
Owen, the customer is always right.

Owen set down his tongs.

OWEN
Claire, cover the grill for a sec.
Claire wipes sweat from her forehead. Looks at the long line of hanging tickets.

CLAIRE
Sure, cover the whole kitchen. No problem.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Owen opens the kitchen door. Puts his arm around Matthew’s shoulder and points toward the front.

OWEN
Look at that crowd. Young, pretty and rich. All lined up to eat your meat. Their demand exceeds our supply. Know what that means?

MATTHEW
I understand rising prices.

OWEN
No. It means Delores can suck our big fat--

CUT TO:

CLOSE UP

Of a platter of large bratwursts on the table.

A YOUNG COUPLE looks up at Matthew, who beams at them.

MATTHEW
Bon appétit!

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - NIGHT

Claire scrubs the counters clean while Matthew watches Owen prepare a dessert.

Owen carefully places green sugar crisps shaped like lettuce leaves onto a white plate. Scoops out three small balls of strawberry sorbet then tops them with baby mint leaves to imitate tomatoes. Sprinkles on white chocolate flakes.

OWEN
Our signature Sweet Caesar Salad.

MATTHEW
Looks like a lot of work.
OWEN
How do you think the top
restaurants charge five hundred
bucks a meal? By twisting
expectations. A strawberry is a
tomato. Chocolate is cheese. Luxury
is an illusion.

Matthew’s phone chimes. He checks the screen.

MATTHEW
Shit. I promised to meet Jess for a
drink after work.

OWEN
Blow her off. I want you all to
myself tonight.

MATTHEW
Hah. She’d kill me.

OWEN
Uh oh. Is she going to put you in
time-out for working too hard?

MATTHEW
No, she’s cool. She knows the
lifestyle.

OWEN
Then what’s the worry? Give me
tonight, and you’re all hers
tomorrow morning. I’ll hook you two
up at my buddy’s diner. Best
breakfast in town. On me.

MATTHEW
I don’t know...

OWEN
Come on. What’s all this for if you
can’t celebrate once in a while?


MATTHEW
What’s one night?

OWEN
Atta boy. Let’s get you dressed.

They head out.
Up above, a stain spreads unnoticed on the ceiling. A fat drip of black slime falls onto the grill.

INT. DROP CEILING - NIGHT

Above the dropped ceiling, a layer of lumpy black mold covers everything. A cockroach skitters by.

INT. NIGHTCLUB - NIGHT

Music pounds and lights flash on the crowded dance floor.

Owen escorts Matthew to the bar. Motions to a BARTENDER.

    OWEN
    Two double scotches. Neat.
    Something smokey and old.

Owen peels a hundred-dollar bill off a roll of cash and slaps it on the counter.

CHIME. Matthew checks his cell phone.

    MATTHEW
    Jess needs the address for the breakfast place.

    OWEN
    Give me that.

Owen grabs the phone. Texts back. Drops it into his pocket.

    OWEN (CONT'D)
    There. Now, will you forget about her and enjoy one night of freedom?


    OWEN (CONT'D)
    To the new Matthew.

They drink.

    MATTHEW
    Oh, wow. That’s good.

    OWEN
    Yes, it is. This is what you should be serving.

    (MORE)
OWEN (CONT'D)
Imagine a full whiskey menu. Priced up to five hundred bucks a pour.

Owen puts his arm around Matthew. Points across the bar.

OWEN (CONT'D)
Check it out. You’re already attracting attention.

BRYNN (25), a beautiful blonde woman in a low-cut red dress, makes eye contact with Matthew. She smiles, then turns back to stirring her drink.

Matthew looks around to see who she was smiling at.

MATTHEW
No... women like that don’t go for guys like me.

OWEN
We tossed fat Matt out in the street, remember? She sees the new Matthew. Attractive, successful, and oozing style.

MATTHEW
I don’t know.

Matthew glances back over and catches her eye again. She finishes her drink.

OWEN
Here’s your chance. Go buy her a drink.

MATTHEW
I couldn’t do that to Jess.

OWEN
I said buy her a drink, not sleep with her. Prove to yourself you could land her if you wanted to.

MATTHEW
You know what? I’ll go get my rejection just to prove you wrong.

OWEN
There’s my man!

Matthew makes his way over.

Brynn glances at Owen, who winks back at her. She turns to Matthew as he approaches.
Owen removes Matthew’s cell phone from his pocket. Brings up the camera to snap photos of Matthew buying her a drink. Quickly hides it when Matthew sneaks him a thumbs up.

The Bartender pours two shots. Brynn pounds hers and gets Matthew to do the same. Grabs his hand and pulls him towards the dance floor.

Matthew shoots Owen a shocked smile.

Matthew’s phone CHIMES with a new notification from Jess.

    JESS (TEXT)
    See you at 8. :)

    OWEN (TEXT)
    Bright and early!

INT. MATTHEW’S BEDROOM - DAY

Matthew SNORES in a deep sleep. The alarm clock reads 10:28.

CHIME. His phone lights up on his bedside table with a series of texts from Jess. CHIME. CHIME.

Matthew stirs. Blinks his eyes open. Hair a mess. Bed lines cross his cheek. Checks his phone and jolts straight up.

    MATTHEW
    Crap!

The hangover hits him. He rushes to the bathroom to throw up.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - NIGHT

Owen and Claire fly through orders. Plates of food stack up on the counter while Matthew tries to sort out the mess.

Jess rushes in.

Matthew tries to find her order.

    JESS
    I can get it myself.

She snatches up two plates and heads back out.

    CLAIRE
    Someone’s in the doghouse.

    MATTHEW
    Watch it, Claire.
Sarah hurries into the kitchen.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Let’s keep it moving! Longer turnovers mean fewer customers.

Matthew loads Sarah up with plates. She looks exhausted.

SARAH
It’s ten o’clock, and we’re still full. I think we’ll be fine.

MATTHEW
You’ll appreciate it when you’re counting fat tips tonight.

Sarah rushes out.

CLaire
Well, I don’t get tips.

Claire flips blackening meat on the grill.

MATTHEW
You’ll be making more money soon.

CLaire
I’m finally getting a raise?

MATTHEW
No. Starting next week, we’re open on Sundays.

CLaire
Seriously? I’m already pulling eighty hours a week. When are you going to replace Tre?

MATTHEW
You and Owen seem to handle the kitchen just fine on your own.

Claire slams a pan onto the stove. Owen looks up.

CLaire
Fine? It’s sweltering in here, the cooler’s a mess--

Owen waves his hand.

Claire’s apron catches the pan’s handle as she turns. Grease sloshes over the side of the pan.

PHWOOM! A fireball leaps up.
Claire screams and falls back. Her apron catches fire.

Matthew grabs an extinguisher and rushes around the counter to put out the flames. Claire’s uniform smolders. The skin on her arm turns lobster red.

EXT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

The lineup of customers at the front door watch as Matthew comforts Claire on the sidewalk. He holds a wet towel over her arm. Checks his Uber app.

   MATTHEW
   We’re looking for a blue Prius.

Claire sobs.

A DISGUSTED CUSTOMER shakes his head.

   DISGUSTED CUSTOMER
   Too cheap to call her an ambulance?

   MATTHEW
   This is faster. There it is.

He waves down the driver. Loads Claire into the back seat.

   MATTHEW (CONT'D)
   (to the driver)
   Drop her off at the emergency entrance. Hurry.

The car drives away.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Matthew finds Jess waiting with her arms folded.

   JESS
   An Uber. Really?

   MATTHEW
   Don’t blame our health care system on me.

Jess walks away.

Keylynn smirks at Matthew.

   MATTHEW (CONT'D)

   What?
EXT. COFFEE SHOP – DAY

Matthew brings out two coffees.

MATTHEW
I thought I owed you a little extra
sugar this morning.

Jess takes her coffee. Nods.

JESS
I hate it when we fight.

MATTHEW
I know. Look, Jess. I’m sorry. It’s
just... Everything is going so
fast. I get caught up in it all.

They stroll into the park, toward the restaurant.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN – DAY

Matthew enters to find Owen dancing to loud music, prepping
large pot of soup. He doesn’t notice a cat tail hanging over
the rim of the pot before Owen knocks it into the soup.

Matthew turns off the radio.

MATTHEW
Seems like everyone’s missing
today.

OWEN
Stir this.

Owen hands Matthew a wooden spoon. Matthew checks the soup in
the pot. It looks delicious. Stirs.

Owen chops vegetables at a blinding speed. CHK-CHK-CHK...

OWEN (CONT’D)
Claire is M.I.A., and both Sarah
and Keith called to say they’re not
working on Sundays.

Owen scrapes diced veggies from the cutting board into the
pot. Starts on the onions.

MATTHEW
So do we close then? Four of us
can’t handle lunch. Even if I cook
and Keylynn helps Jess with--
OWEN
--Matthew, you’re the boss. Do you even want employees that would disobey you like this?

MATTHEW
They’re normally really good.

Owen tosses the onions into the pot. Takes the spoon.

OWEN
Are they though? How many dishes did Sarah break last night? Or free drinks Keith gave away?

Owen offers a spoonful of meaty soup for Matthew.

OWEN (CONT'D)
Try this. What does it need?

Matthew tastes. Smacks his lips.

MATTHEW
Mm. More salt?

OWEN
Ah. Where would we be without salt?

Owen adds salt.

MATTHEW
Sarah and Keith are family.

OWEN
They’re mutineers.

MATTHEW
The customers love them.

OWEN
Plain-Jane Sarah dresses like a truck stop waitress, and Scruff Ball Keith doesn’t even brush his teeth. Our new customers aren’t here for a meal. Dining out should be a spectacle. And our staff should be performers.

MATTHEW
Do we have time to find new staff?

OWEN
Say the word, and I’ll have replacements within the hour.
MATTHEW
I don’t know.

OWEN
If you want to pull off this
banquet, you’ll need the right
crew. What’s your choice? Progress
or stagnation?

INT. DINING ROOM – DAY

Owen introduces two new hires to Jess and Matthew; DUSCHAN
(22), perfectly coifed, resting douche face, and Brynn, the
temptress from the nightclub.

OWEN
Meet Duschan. Recently crowned the
hottest young bartender in the
state. He can make any drink you
can name and a hundred more.

Duschan smirks and spins a bottle in the air.

DUSCHAN
Anyone want a Blackbeard’s Nipple?

OWEN
And Brynn comes with her own
following. One Insta from her, and
we’ll be packed till midnight.

BRYNN
With lonely men. Just warning you.

Brynn gives Matthew a knowing look.

Jess notices as Matthew averts his eyes.

JESS
(whispers to Matthew)
They look like high-priced escorts.

MATTHEW
(whispers back)
You’re not wrong about the price.

EXT. RESTAURANT – NIGHT

Luxury cars line the street in front of the restaurant. A
crowd mills under the glowing red Brymstone sign.
INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Drunken patrons pack the dimly lit restaurant. ELECTRONIC MUSIC thumps over their loud chatter.

Someone grabs Jess’s bum as she carries dishes to the kitchen. She spins around, unable to identify the creep in the crowd.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jess dumps the dishes into a bus bin. Spots Owen effortlessly running the kitchen all by himself while dancing to the beat. She steps aside as Brynn carries out armloads of plates.

JESS
(angry)
Where’s Matthew?

Owen snorts a bump of coke off his fist.

OWEN
Out back.

EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT

Matthew sits on a crate. Knees up. Shoulders slumped. Takes a drag of his cigarette as the door opens behind him.

MATTHEW
Just give me two minutes.

JESS
Smoking again?


MATTHEW
Busy night. I feel like I’m wearing concrete shoes. The tips good?

JESS
Huge. If this keeps up, you’ll get everything you wanted.

Matthew refills a wine glass. Hands it to Jess and takes a swig straight from the bottle.
MATTHEW
We’ll see. Food cost is down, receipts are up, but so far all the extra money’s gone to renos and the new staff. Owen says we’ll be in the black after the banquet.

JESS
Do you trust him?

MATTHEW
Sure. Why not? He’s an incredible chef, and he knows business.

JESS
But look at you. You’ve lost your friends. You’re smoking again. Drinking. And I hate to say it, but you’re getting a bit of a chub.

She pinches his love handle.

MATTHEW
(laughs)
I’m fine.

JESS
Are we fine? Really? You haven’t been coming over anymore.

MATTHEW
I’m sorry. I’m just dead after these shifts.

JESS
Is there something you’re not telling me?

MATTHEW
Of course not! Look, I’ll admit it. Something about Owen brings out the worst in me.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN – NIGHT

Owen leans his back against the wall by the back door, eavesdropping.

MATTHEW (O.S.)
Let me get past this banquet, and then I’ll cut him loose and we can hire any chef we want.
Owen pulls out his cell phone. Dials a number as he heads back to the grill.

OWEN
We’ve got a problem.

EXT. PARK - NIGHT

Owen strolls over to a railing overlooking the water. Stops next to a man standing in the shadows, one hand on the rail.

The SHADOW MAN takes a drag off a cigarette. Its glowing ember lights up the brim of his hat.

OWEN
Matthew’s planning to cut me loose.
I need to expose those pictures of him with Brynn.

SHADOW MAN
I told you no. You’re taking too much control. It’s too easy for him to claim credit for the successes and blame you for the failures.

OWEN
Give me a couple more days, and he’ll be in so deep he’ll never climb out.

SHADOW MAN
You miss the point. I don’t care if he fails. He needs to fall. A man won’t truly be corrupted unless the choices are his own.

OWEN
I understand.

SHADOW MAN
Do you? Sometimes I doubt you understand a thing.

OWEN
I won’t fail you.

SHADOW MAN
See that you don’t.

The Shadow Man walks away. Owen looks down at the RED-HOT glowing rail where the Shadow Man’s hand was.
INT. RESTAURANT OFFICE - DAY

Matthew adjusts a pair of glasses on his nose. Pushes receipts to the side and counts a stack of cash.

Owen knocks on the door.

    OWEN
    How’d we do?

    MATTHEW
    Best night yet. Lunch starting?

    OWEN
    Yes. And you’ll never guess who Keylynn just sat.

Matthew shoves the cash into an envelope.

    MATTHEW
    Who?

    OWEN
    A certain local critic with a certain little food blog.

    MATTHEW
    Marlene? You’re kidding me. She roasted us last time she was here.

Matthew gets up and rushes out.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - DAY

Matthew and Owen peek out into the dining room. MARLENE (50s) sits at a table, analyzing the menu with a stern expression.

    OWEN
    To be fair, she roasts everyone.

    MATTHEW
    This is bad.

    OWEN
    Nonsense. She’ll love her lunch. You’re going to cook it.

    MATTHEW
    Oh, no way. You’re the chef.

Owen leads Matthew back to the grill. Points out the ingredients.
OWEN
Sauces are all prepped. Meats are marinated and ready to throw on.
I’ll walk you through it.
   (laughs)
As long as she doesn’t order the scallops, we’ll be fine.

MATTHEW
Are we out of scallops?

OWEN
No, we’ve got some.

Jess comes in with a ticket.

MATTHEW
Is that her order? What is it?

JESS
Scallops.

MATTHEW
Of course. Okay. We can do this. I’ve cooked scallops before.

Matthew heads toward the walk-in cooler.

OWEN
Don’t go in there. Uh, the cooler was full. They’re out back.

MATTHEW
Out... What?

EXT. ALLEY - DAY

Sun beats down on a soggy cardboard box.

Matthew opens it up. Off-color scallops swim in a slimy soup.

MATTHEW
What are we going to do?

OWEN
Your choice, but you’d better think of something. I’ve seen her write reviews so scathing that even cooks stopped eating their own food.
INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

Matthew personally delivers a plate to the table and sets it before Marlene. A simple grilled chicken breast.

MARLENE
This isn’t what I ordered.

MATTHEW
I thought I’d keep it simple. Grilled chicken with a side salad.

MARLENE
Where’s the salad?

MATTHEW
Look under the plate.

Marlene tips the plate up and looks at the envelope underneath. She nudges the flap open and eyes the cash.

MARLENE
Hmm.

MATTHEW
Bon appétit.

A rat scurries unnoticed along the floorboards.

INT. RESTAURANT DINING ROOM - LATER

The whole staff gathers by the bar. Matthew checks his phone.

Duschan sets out champagne glasses for everyone. A bottle of champagne to the left, and a bottle of vodka to the right.

DUSCHAN
Which will it be? Sweet victory or miserable defeat?

Matthew holds up his cell phone.

MATTHEW
Okay, it’s up.

JESS
Quiet everyone.

MATTHEW
(reads)
When I reviewed Matthew a year ago, The food was tasty, but unexciting.
(MORE)
MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Despite re-branding with the irritatively trendy name “Brymstone,” and a newly made-over dining room that looks like it had been raped by the decorator...

Matthew clears his throat. Shifts uncomfortably.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
...I must say, the new menu is on fire. If you’re looking for new and irresistible delights, this is the place to be.

Duschan pops the cork on the Champagne bottle.

DUSCHAN
Victory!

The restaurant phone RINGS. Keylynn gets up to answer it.

OWEN
Get ready for a busy night, people. That phone’s not going to stop ringing today.

Everyone drinks.

OWEN (CONT'D)
Matthew, take a walk with me.

EXT. PARK – DAY

Owen turns Matthew to face the restaurant.

OWEN
What do you see?

MATTHEW
A restaurant that’s about to be slammed for dinner tonight.

OWEN
Think about the banquet.

MATTHEW
Honestly? Does that even matter? We’re booked full every night.
OWEN
You’ve got to think bigger. If we really nail this banquet, it’s only the beginning. Think franchise, television, frozen foods.

MATTHEW
I’m sold. What do you see?

OWEN
A for-sale sign next door.

Matthew thinks about it.

MATTHEW
We could double our capacity.

OWEN
Bingo.

MATTHEW
But, we don’t have the free cash to make a downpayment. And no bank would make a loan this quickly.

OWEN
Come on, man. Grow some balls and think of something.

MATTHEW
Jess and I have been saving up for a house... but, she’d kill me if I tapped into our joint account.

OWEN
She’ll never notice. In a few days, your balance will be five times as big. You can buy two houses.

MATTHEW
We only need one.

Owen laughs.

OWEN
Then buy a mansion! Loosen up. You only live once, isn’t that what they say now?

MATTHEW
All right.

OWEN
Hell yeah! Now let’s see you strut!
Owen puts his arm around Matthew, and they strut back to the restaurant.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Chattering and laughing diners pack the room. Keylynn seats a group. Jess and Brynn serve. Duschan entertains at the bar by twirling bottles as he makes drinks.

Matthew, dressed in a stylish new suit, chats up a table of six. They laugh along with him.

MATTHEW
Enjoy your meals. Anything you need just ask for Matthew.

Jess intercepts Matthew as he moves on.

JESS
Table three’s not happy.

Matthew looks over. An UNHAPPY DINER in a silk shirt, wearing a gold chain, sits across from his date, KRISTA. A plate of calamari sits untouched between them.

MATTHEW
Let me handle it.

Matthew approaches.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
How is everything so far?

UNHAPPY DINER
Fine until we came here. Do you expect us to eat this overcooked crap?

The carefully arranged calamari remains untouched.

MATTHEW
I’ll bring you out a new order right away.

UNHAPPY DINER
No, forget it. Crystal--

KRISTA
--it’s Krista.

UNHAPPY DINER
Whatever. She’s not into it. Just get our meals out here, now.
MATTHEW
Not a problem. I’ll go check--

UNHAPPY DINNER
--Did I ask you to check on it? I said I want it now so we can get out of this dump.

Other customers react to the Unhappy Diner’s raised voice.

MATTHEW
Of course.

UNHAPPY DINNER
And my steaks had better be well-done. I don’t want any pink inside.

MATTHEW
Sir, a well-done steak takes--

UNHAPPY DINNER
--Are you dense? Stop wasting my time and get the damned food!

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - NIGHT
Matthew leans over the counter to check the tickets.

MATTHEW
What’s the ETA on table three?

Owen points at a rare steak on the grill.

OWEN
Didn’t they just get their appetizer?

MATTHEW
The guy’s an asshole. Said it was overcooked.

Matthew sets down the calamari plate and shoves it toward Owen. Owen takes a bite.

OWEN
It’s perfect.

MATTHEW
He wants his steak well-done and wants it now.
OWEN
The best way to punish someone is
to give him what he wants.

Owen winks at Matthew. Matthew’s face lights up.

QUICK CUTS
- Matthew shoves the steak in the microwave. Power level 15.
- Matthew kicks the steak across the floor to Owen.
- Owen blackens it with a blowtorch.
- Matthew hocks a huge loogie into a side of mashed potatoes.

INT. DINER - ROOM

Matthew sets a salad in front of Krista and steak and potatoes in front of the Unhappy Diner.

UNHAPPY DINER
It’s about time.

INT. RESTAURANT MEN’S ROOM - NIGHT

Matthew peeks his head into the bathroom. The Unhappy Diner’s loud moans emit from a stall, followed by simultaneous BOWEL SOUNDS and VOMITING. Matthew winces with each noise.

The toilet FLUSHES. Matthew hides before the stall door opens.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Matthew watches the Unhappy Diner emerge from the bathroom. Pale and sweaty. Slightly disheveled.

Matthew opens the bathroom door and recoils from the smell. Looks around for help, but the staff is all busy with customers. He groans and grabs a mop.

INT. DINING ROOM - LATER

The dining room is empty. Brynn and Keylynn sit with Owen at the bar while Duschan pours drinks.

Matthew emerges from the kitchen.
MATTHEW
Where’s Jess?

Jess arrives from the front of the house.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Ah great. Well, everyone. I just wanted to say what an amazing job you all did tonight. I know it’s hard being short staffed, but somehow we pulled it off. I promise that, right after the banquet, we’ll be able to afford to hire more help.

JESS
Matthew, I need to talk to you.

MATTHEW
Just a minute.

OWEN
Matthew and I have decided that you all deserve to celebrate. We’re taking you out. Drinks on us.

Jess tugs at Matthew’s arm.

JESS
Now.

Matthew follows her to the side.

MATTHEW
What is it?

Jess shoves an ATM receipt into his hand.

JESS
Where’s our money? There’s three hundred bucks left in our joint account. I called the bank, and they said you withdrew it.

MATTHEW
I was going to tell you. I had to borrow a little for the banquet.

JESS
You didn’t think to ask me first?

MATTHEW
In just a few days we’ll have it all back and more.
JESS
That’s not the point. Half that money was mine.

Owen and crew head toward the front.

OWEN
You two lovebirds ready?

Matthew holds up a finger to indicate one minute.

MATTHEW
It’ll all work out. I promise. Come out tonight and have some fun.

JESS
With who’s money?

Owen calls back from the front door.

OWEN
Train’s leaving.

Matthew turns back to Jess.

MATTHEW
I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I promise I won’t spend any more of our money without talking to you.

JESS
Go out with your new friends. I’m too tired.

MATTHEW
Will you still meet me for coffee in the morning?

Matthew leans in to kiss her. She half-kisses him back.

JESS
Sure.

MATTHEW
Jess. I promise, promise, promise the money will be spent responsibly. Trust me.

EXT. RESTAURANT – NIGHT

Matthew exits while Jess hangs back to turn off the lights.

Owen hands Matthew a set of car keys.
MATTHEW
What’s this?
Owen points at a brand new BMW.

OWEN
Your new company car.

MATTHEW
Matthew’s face lights up.
Where did--

He looks at the ATM receipt. Then back at the restaurant.

MATTHEW (CONT’D)
Let’s roll.

EXT. NIGHTCLUB – NIGHT
A well-dressed, 250-pound BOUNCER screens a long line of people.

Owen’s sports car stops at the valet. He exits with Keylynn.

Matthew’s BMW rolls up behind them. Duschan gets out of the back seat. Brynn emerges from the passenger seat.

Matthew steps out and straightens his jacket. Tosses his keys to a VALET.

MATTHEW
Don’t scratch it.

He joins Owen at the front of the line.

Owen slips the Bouncer some bills. Introduces Matthew.

OWN
This is my partner in crime. You ever need anything at Brymstone, just ask for Matthew.

BOUNCER
Right on.

The Bouncer steps aside to let them in.

INT. NIGHTCLUB – NIGHT
Owen guides them back to a booth in a roped-off section. He hands some cash to Keylynn.
OWEN
You three go have fun. I need to talk to Matthew.

BRYNN
Don’t hog him all to yourself.

Brynn winks and saunters away with Keylynn and Duschan.

OWEN
I think she likes you.

MATTHEW
Brynn?

OWEN
Get used to it. Success attracts women like moths.

MATTHEW
I don’t want moths.

OWEN
Hah. I’ve seen the look on your face. Admit it. You love the attention.

Brynn and Keylynn grind together on the dance floor. Brynn waves for Matthew to join them.

MATTHEW
Damn right I do.

OWEN
I knew it! You want to own that dance floor, don’t you?

MATTHEW
Honestly, tonight I think I could. I feel pumped.

OWEN
Hell yeah. Check you out. Rolling like Scarface up in the club.

MATTHEW
I’m going for it.

Matthew starts to get up, but Owen holds him back.

OWEN
One second. I got something brewing for the banquet, but we’re going to need some more money.
Matthew’s eyes go wide.

OWEN (CONT’D)
Don’t make that face. This is huge. The biggest name in fashion is flying in on Friday. If she makes an appearance at the banquet, it’ll be international news.

MATTHEW
How much does she charge?

OWEN
Thirty grand.

MATTHEW
Thirty?!

OWEN
I know. It’s incredible what a single, carefully leaked sex-tape can do for one’s career.

MATTHEW
Where am I supposed to get that kind of money? I’m cleaned out.

Matthew pulls a contract from his pocket.

OWEN
Give me the word and I’ve got a guy who’ll give us a loan against a twenty percent stake in the restaurant. Ten from my share and ten from yours.

Matthew looks at the paper, incredulous.

MATTHEW
No way. I’m not giving up any more control.

OWEN
You don’t have to. We’ll pay the loan back in three days and you’re clear. Fifteen hundred bucks in interest. It’s nothing compared to how much buzz she’ll generate.

Owen hands Matthew a pen.

MATTHEW
How long have you known this guy?
OWEN
Forever. Listen, if you don’t pull this off, you’ll go back to being nothing. Like no record of you ever existed. What do you say?

Matthew hesitates. Sighs. Signs the paper.

OWEN (CONT’D)
Great!

Owen pulls out a small vial and shakes out some powder onto each of their fists.

OWEN (CONT’D)
Now let’s seal the deal and go tear this club up.

Matthew hesitates. Looks out at Brynn and Keylynn dancing seductively with each other. He snorts the drugs.

MATTHEW
Let’s do it.

QUICK FLASHES
- Matthew pounds shots.
- Matthew dances on the crowded dance floor.
- Matthew sees a tail on Brynn.
- Brynn dances seductively.

INT. MATTHEW’S BEDROOM - DAY
Matthew wakes up with a groan. Holds his hand to his head. He opens his eyes and cringes at the bright sunlight.

The alarm clock reads 10:11 AM.

He grabs his phone. Text notifications from Jess fill the screen. The last one being:

JESS (TEXT)
“WTH are you???”

MATTHEW
Shit!

Matthew sits up.
Someone stirs in the bed next to him. He flips the sheets down to see Brynn smiling up at him.

BRYNN
Good morning.

MATTHEW
Ahhh!

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK.

Matthew jumps out of bed at the sound of someone at the door. Full panic mode.

He quickly covers himself. Tosses Brynn’s clothes to her.

Brynn catches the clothes and watches in amusement as Matthew struggles to put on his pants.

Matthew’s foot gets caught, and he falls over. He flinches in alarm at the sound of a key in the apartment door. He looks out of the bedroom and sees the apartment door opening.

It’s Jess.

Matthew crawls across the floor. Slams the bedroom door shut.

JESS (O.S.)
Matthew?

MATTHEW
Just a minute?
(whispers to Brynn)
Hide!

Matthew stands and pulls his pants up. Brynn doesn’t move.

Jess opens the door. Her face drops in shock at the sight of Brynn in Matthew’s bed and Matthew frozen in the act of zipping his pants.

MATTHEW (CONT’D)
It’s not--

Jess slams the door.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Jess, wait!

Brynn laughs.

BRYNN
Oops.
Matthew runs out after Jess.

INT. RESTAURANT DINING ROOM - DAY

Early customers look up as Matthew storms into the restaurant. Glares at Brynn as she serves a dish.

Matthew stamps across the dining room toward the kitchen.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Owen whistles along to the MUSIC on the radio.

Matthew bursts in. He slams his hand onto the radio, turning it off.

MATTHEW
You’ve finally done it!

OWNEN
Done what?

MATTHEW
I knew I shouldn’t have gone to the club with you. I should have learned my lesson the first time.

OWNEN
What happened?

MATTHEW
You know what! Brynn happened. “Oh Matthew, you’re such a lady’s man. Ooh, I think she likes you.” You probably set the whole thing up from the beginning.

OWNEN
I don’t know what you’re talking about. Did you make a bad choice?

MATTHEW
Agh! You’re so infuriating! Ever since you showed up, things have gone wrong.

Owen sets his knife on the counter. Light glints off the sharp steel.
OWEN
Seems to me like you’ve been
getting everything you ever wanted.
I just helped.

MATTHEW
You’ve only helped with one thing.
People love your food.

Matthew grabs a big, juicy hamburger off a plate. Takes a big
bite from the thick, perfectly cooked patty.

Owen sighs. Throws another patty on the grill.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
(sarcastic)
Mmm. Owen’s food is so good. Owen
is so cool. How do you do it, huh?

OWEN
I told you, salt, fat, sugar--

MATTHEW
--Shut up! You’ve got everyone else
fooled, but I can see through your
tricks and lies. Everything is an
illusion, you said it yourself. The
business, the glamour. But the
food... I can’t figure out how you
make it taste so good.

Matthew takes another huge bite. Talks with his mouth full.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
People can’t stop eating it. What
are you putting in the meat? Drugs?

OWEN
Do you really want to know?

MATTHEW
Yes! I really do.

OWEN
I simply let people see what they
want to see. If you really want the
truth, all you have to do is look.

Matthew swallows. His eyes narrow.

MATTHEW
What do you--
Matthew looks down at the burger in his hands. Worms wriggle through the bloody patty and maggots tumble off onto the counter. He throws the burger down in disgust.

Matthew looks around the kitchen with fresh eyes. The sparkling clean facade is gone. MOLD covers every surface. INSECTS crawl on the walls. SLIME drips from the ceiling.

Matthew gags and runs to the sink to throw up. The sink is filled with animal bones soaking in a putrid swamp.

Matthew swoons.

OWEN
You’ve even been fooling yourself.

Matthew looks at his reflection in the polished steel of the microwave. He touches a cold sore on his lips. He looks down at his belly, which appears twenty pounds heavier.

MATTHEW
Oh God.

OWEN
God has nothing to do with this.
You gave him up.

Rats SQUEAK by the cooler. A line of ants flows from the partially opened door.

Matthew stumbles over and swings it open. Recoils in disgust. Flies swarm out. Rancid food drips from every rack.

Matthew vomits.

MATTHEW
(weakly)
The customers...

OWEN
Don’t worry about them. They’re still oblivious.

Owen waves his hand, and everything appears clean again.

OWEN (CONT’D)
Isn’t the illusion so much better?

Owen approaches and puts his arm around Matthew.

MATTHEW
Don’t touch me.

Matthew is too weak to push him away.
Owen helps him to his feet. Guides him toward the dining room as he talks.

    OWEN
    Matthew. I’m only giving you what you want. Everything you desire is in your reach. So decide. Do you want me to show everyone the truth, or do you want fame and fortune?

They stop at the dining-room door. Owen points out through the window at the patrons stuffing themselves like pigs.

    OWEN (CONT'D)
    Look at them. Like ticks ready to pop. Engorged on the delights that you served them.

    MATTHEW
    Go away.

    OWEN
    You are nothing without me.

    MATTHEW
    This is still my restaurant.

    OWEN
    Not if you don’t pay back the loan.

    MATTHEW
    I can do the banquet without you.

    OWEN
    How? You have no friends. Only me.

    MATTHEW
    You’re the devil.

    OWEN
    Close. But no. I merely do his work. And people like you make it so easy.

    MATTHEW
    Just get out. We’re through.

    OWEN
    Are you sure?

    MATTHEW
    Yes.
OWEN
So be it.

Owen waves his hand. The illusion of cleanliness is gone.

SCREAMS erupt from the dining room. Some diners scramble out of their seats in panic, others retch right at their tables.

Brynn, Keylynn, and Duschan laugh, now older, uglier and covered in sores.

Owen removes his apron and drops it on the floor. Walks out.

Matthew sinks to his knees.

EXT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Cars drive past the lonely restaurant. The “OPEN” sign glows red, but no one lines up outside.

INT. RESTAURANT DINING ROOM - NIGHT

All the tables sit empty.

Matthew sits alone at the bar. Finishes off a glass of scotch. Pours the last drops from a bottle.

The headline of Marlene’s restaurant blog on his phone reads:

"BRYMSTONE’S HOUSE OF HORRORS"

Matthew gets up from his stool and walks around behind the bar. Opens up a cardboard shipping case. Pulls out a bottle of 20-year-old scotch and inspects it.

Uncorks it and takes a swig.

MATTHEW
Nice.

Matthew checks his chat conversation with Jess. It’s just a series of his texts with no response: “Hey,” “Call me,” “Jess?” “Where are you?”

He pulls up Angelo’s contact and calls him.

ANGELO (V.O.)
(over the phone)
You’ve got Angelo, please leave a message.

Matthew hangs up. Strolls to the front door.
EXT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT
Matthew meanders outside. Doesn’t even bother to lock the door behind him.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT
Matthew wanders aimlessly. Drinking from the bottle. A car drives by and splashes him.

INT. FAST-FOOD RESTAURANT - NIGHT
A bored CASHIER mops the floor behind the counter. Sets the mop aside as Matthew stumbles in.

    CASHIER
    Welcome to Portly’s. What can I get you?

Matthew stares at pictures of big greasy burgers on the menu.

    MATTHEW
    A burger. No. A bacon cheeseburger. And a large chili-cheese fries. Do you have milkshakes?

    CASHIER
    Vanilla, chocolate, or strawberry?

    MATTHEW
    One of each. You know how long it’s been since I’ve had a milkshake?

The Cashier shrugs. Rings up the order.

    CASHIER
    That’ll be twenty-eight, fifty.

    MATTHEW
    Twenty--? I’m in the wrong business.

Matthew pulls out his wallet. Only two dollars in cash. Takes out his credit card instead.

    MATTHEW (CONT’D)
    I own a restaurant, you know? But somehow I don’t have a thing to eat.

The Cashier runs the card. BEEP. Frowns.
CASHIER
Sorry, man. It says declined.

MATTHEW
What? Here, try this one.

The Cashier runs the second card. BEEP.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Okay, listen. Maybe you don’t recognize me. My restaurant is Brymstone down the street. Used to be Matthew’s? I’m Matthew. How about you give me that old pre-made burger there, and I’ll comp you a meal?

CASHIER
Nah, man. I heard of that place.

MATTHEW
Nah? One of my burgers is worth three times a whole meal here! They’re gourmet. GOUR-MET!

The Cashier leans forward to loom over Matthew.

CASHIER
Okay, I’m gonna ask you to back on up out of here now.

Matthew puts up his hands. Makes a show of turning around.

MATTHEW
All right. All right.

As soon as the Cashier relaxes Matthew lunges over the counter and reaches for the burger.

The Cashier tries to grab him, but Matthew wriggles away. They wrestle, smashing the burger in the process.

Matthew holds the tattered thing up in triumph.

CASHIER
You just told me your name, dude.

MATTHEW
So bill me!

Matthew stumbles out.
EXT. PARK - NIGHT

Matthew sits on a bench. Clothes torn and muddy.

Unwraps a huge, greasy cheeseburger. Just as he lifts it to take a bite, a seagull swoops by, snatches it from his hands, and flies away, leaving a trail of burger fillings.

MATTHEW
Hey!

Matthew throws the burger wrapper on the ground and licks his fingers.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Damn starving seagull! I hope that burger gives you the--

A stream of white bird poop nails Matthew on the shoulder.

BY THE WATER

Owen giggles next to the Shadow Man, watching Matthew.

The Shadow Man shakes his head.

SHADOW MAN
Your childish games do nothing to help our cause.

PARK BENCH

Matthew squints through the darkness at the two shadowy figures watching him. Looks around and realizes that he’s otherwise alone.

He stands up and casually takes a few steps away. Looks back.

The two remain motionless, staring.

Matthew hurries away at a fast walk.

BY THE WATER

The Shadow Man touches the end of the cigarette. It starts to glow. He takes a drag.

OWEN
He’s in our hands now.
SHADOW MAN
Do not be deceived. His soul is more at risk to us now than when he was reaping the rewards of his selfishness. A beggar stealing bread is no lower than the rich man refusing to feed the hungry.

OWEN
There’s no way he can repay the loan tomorrow. Then, he’ll know he’s ours.

SHADOW MAN
We shall see.

A fire glows in the Shadow Man’s eyes.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT
Matthew hurries down the sidewalk, looking back over his shoulder. He spots the glowing red eyes.

Matthew takes off at a run.

Turns onto a new street. Tries to flag down a passing car, but it speeds up to avoid him.

Matthew ducks into the alcove of a church. Breathes heavily. Peeks back around the corner. No sign of the two strangers.

He pulls out his cell phone and opens his contact card. The first number is Angelo’s. His thumb hovers over the call button. Then locks the phone and drops it back in his pocket.

Takes a drink.

He heads across the empty street. Halts. Turns to look back at the place he had been hiding and realizes it was a church.

MATTHEW
So where’ve you been, huh?

He waits. Of course, there’s no answer. Matthew scoffs. Turns away. Pauses. Spins back to address the church again.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
I’m sorry, okay? Is that what you want to hear? Sorry that I tried to make something of myself. It’s not like you were helping. Everything I built I did on my own.
Matthew sighs.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
What do you want from me? I’ve never been good enough for you.

The church remains dark and silent.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Whatever.

Matthew leaves.

At the corner of a busy street, he spots a bar with people milling outside. Its light promises warmth and safety. Starts toward it. Stops.

This time Matthew turns and shouts back at the church.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
You know what? This is who I am. (motions to his body) A dirty, fat, flawed sinner! If that’s what you want, I’m yours.

Matthew dumps the half empty bottle of scotch into a garbage can and heads in the opposite direction of the bar.

His phone RINGS. He answers.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Angelo? Thank God you called. I have something to confess...

EXT. NONNI’S TOWNHOUSE - NIGHT

Angelo’s car pulls up. He steps out. Matthew gets out of the passenger side.

MATTHEW
What are we doing all the way out here?

Matthew follows Angelo up the steps to the front door.

ANGELO
This situation calls for ultimate comfort food. Besides, my Nonni’s never had a chance to cook for you.

MATTHEW
Well, I appreciate it. I’m starving.
Angelo reaches for the doorbell.

ANGELO
I have to warn you. She’s a bit--

The door swings open. NONNI (75), Angelo’s short and lively Italian grandmother, greets them.

NONNI
Angie! Why do you never visit?

ANGELO
I’m here now, Nonni.

NONNI
Bless me. Aren’t I the lucky one? My own grandson graces me with a with his presence. Matthew, it’s about time you came. How come I’ve never had the chance to cook for you? Huh? Italian food not good enough for a big successful restaurant owner?

ANGELO
Take it easy, Nonni. He’s going to love your food.

MATTHEW
I’m sure I will. Thank you so much for--

NONNI
--Nonsense. Come in, come in.

And she’s gone.

MATTHEW
She’s a ball of energy.

ANGELO
Each visit is worth about five. I have to spread ‘em out. Okay, so some things you should know--

Matthew slaps Angelo’s shoulder.

MATTHEW
Relax. I’ve got this. Grandmas used to be half of our customer base, remember?

Matthew heads inside.
INT. NONNI’S DINING ROOM – NIGHT

Matthew and Angelo stare at large plates piled high with cheesy lasagna, salad, and garlic bread.

Nonni comes to sit with them.

    ANGELO
    Nonni, I told you he’s on a diet.

    MATTHEW
    No worries. This is exactly what I needed. Let’s dig in.

Nonni pours three large glasses of red wine.

    NONNI
    To family and friends.

    MATTHEW AND ANGELO
    Cheers!

A LITTLE LATER

Matthew savors the last bite of lasagna from his plate.

    MATTHEW
    Oh wow. I needed that.

Nonni scoops another large piece of lasagna from the casserole dish and puts it on Matthew’s plate.

    MATTHEW (CONT’D)
    Oh, no. I can’t--

    NONNI
    Nonsense. There’s plenty.

Nonni stands up.

    NONNI (CONT’D)
    Wait until you see what’s for dessert.

She hurries back to the kitchen.

    ANGELO
    What are you doing? She wasn’t going to make a dessert.

    MATTHEW
    I didn’t ask for dessert!
ANGELO
You cleaned your plate. You might as well have told her you’re starving.

MATTHEW
You said it’s offensive to leave food.

ANGELO
That’s for Colombians. If you leave an empty plate for an Italian grandma, she’ll be ashamed that you didn’t get enough food.

MATTHEW
What do I do now?

Angelo laughs. Sits back with his wine glass.

ANGELO
Keep eating.

EXT. NONNI’S TOWNHOUSE – NIGHT

Angelo waits on the porch as Matthew kisses Nonni on both cheeks. Smiles broadly.

MATTHEW
That was wonderful. Thank you so much.

Nonni hands Matthew a bag of leftovers.

NONNI
You come over next week, and I’ll make you my famous cannelloni.

Matthew looks at Angelo, who shrugs.

MATTHEW
I wouldn’t miss it.

Angelo hugs Nonni.

ANGELO
Thanks, Nonni. Now you’ve got to let us get out of here. Matthew and I have a lot of work ahead of us.
INT. RESTAURANT DINING ROOM - DAY

Angelo, Tre, Clair, Lewis, Sarah, and Keith gather around as Matthew hands them takeout coffees. Everyone except Jess.

Lewis yawns and stretches.

Matthew watches the front door.

ANGELO
I don’t think she’s coming.

The crew looks around the dining room. It hasn’t been cleaned since the night everyone left. Dirty dishes on the tables. Overturned chairs.

MATTHEW
I don’t deserve her forgiveness. I don’t deserve any of you.

CLAIRE
Yet here we are.

TRE
Yeah, man. All you had to do was ask. I don’t even know why I left.

Keith and Sarah nod.

MATTHEW
Well, I sorry. Truly. I behaved like an ass, and I thought I could do this without you. I lost my way, and now it might be too late.

SARAH
Not with our help.

KEITH
Our old customers will return when they hear things are back to normal. It will just take a little time to regain their trust.

MATTHEW
Well, that’s the problem. We don’t have any time. We need everyone to come to the banquet tonight.

The group shuffles. Alarmed.

CLAIRE
Tonight?! Have you seen the kitchen? It’s a nightmare.
TRE
Even if we could get people to come, we don’t have any food stock left. Everything is rotten.

Matthew holds up his hands.

MATTHEW
I know. I know. It seems impossible. But if it doesn’t happen, I’m done. I took out a loan against the restaurant, and if I don’t pay it back by midnight, Owen and his shady partner gain control.

Keith pulls out his wallet.

KEITH
How much do you owe?

MATTHEW
Thirty-thousand just to cancel the contract.

The group looks around, nervous.

ANGELO
We can do it, guys.

KEITH
I don’t know man. In one day?

The front door opens. Jess enters with a box of cleaning supplies.

JESS
Sorry I’m late.

Matthew looks at Angelo in surprise. rushes over to Jess with his arms out for a hug.

MATTHEW
You came!

JESS
Don’t get your hopes up. I’m here to get our money back.

MATTHEW (humbled)
I’m still glad.
INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - DAY

The staff scrubs everything. Walls, appliances, ceiling. Tre shoves a dark grey sludge out the back door with a mop.

Angelo and Matthew work off to the side at a clean grill. Angelo kneels to inspect a sizzling chicken breast on the grill. Pulls Matthew close.

ANGELO
Cooked meat is genuinely the best smell in the world. Scientists say the heat of the flames causes chemical reactions with the fats and flavors, releasing particles into the air that we’ve evolved to go nuts for.

Matthew looks at Angelo in surprise.

ANGELO (CONT'D)
But to me, it’s proof that God loves us.

Angelo sprinkles a pinch of seasoning on top. Gently pokes the chicken breast with the tongs. A small stream of hot grease trickles out. The flames leap.

ANGELO (CONT'D)
The trick is to leave it on just long enough to cook it, but not so long that it dries out. Ready?

MATTHEW
One sec.

Matthew finishes arranging an artful bed of greens and veggies on a dish.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Okay.

Angelo lifts the chicken breast off the grill and places it onto the bed. Slices the breast open and lifts the top.

Matthew spoons goat cheese and sun-dried tomatoes into the middle.

ANGELO

Happy?

MATTHEW

Wait.
Matthew takes a spoonful of pesto and flings it. The pesto splats across the plate in a messy contrast to the carefully arranged food.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Now it’s good.

EXT. FOOD MARKET – DAY
Marlene strolls through the open-air aisles. Picks out a plum. Smells it, eyes closed.

MARLENE
Mm.

MATTHEW (O.S.)
Marlene.

Marlene opens her eyes. Turns to look at Matthew.

MARLENE
Oh no. Starting a new career as a stalker? How did you find me?

Matthew holds up his cell phone.

MATTHEW
You blog about everything. Your entire routine is online.

MARLENE
(to Angelo)
I see you’re back with this scoundrel.

ANGELO
What can I say? I’m loyal.

MARLENE
So, are you here to bribe me again?

Angelo glances at Matthew, who shrugs.

ANGELO
We just want one more shot. No tricks or bribes. Owen’s gone. If you know anything about me, it’s that I only use fresh ingredients.

MARLENE
You know I am literally the last person who’d be seen at your restaurant after that fiasco.
ANGELO
That’s why we want you to try our
new dish right now.

Matthew reaches into a bag and pulls out a serving dish.
Lifts the lid to reveal a goat cheese and pesto Mediterranean
chicken, topped with chickpeas and sun-dried tomatoes.

MARLENE
Mediterranean chicken? I wouldn’t
exactly call it innovative, but I
see you improved your presentation,
at least.

ANGELO
Taste it.

MATTHEW
Please?

Marlene sighs.

MARLENE
Fine. One bite. Then I want you to
leave me alone.

Angelo hands her a fork and knife. She cuts a small piece of
chicken. Makes sure to get a bit of each ingredient. Takes a
bite. She closes her eyes and savors it as she chews.

MARLENE (CONT'D)
May I?

Matthew hands the tray to her. She finds a place to sit and
eat. Talks while chewing.

MARLENE (CONT'D)
Is your whole menu going to be this
good?

ANGELO
I guarantee it.

She takes another bite.

MARLENE
I’ve got a slot open next month.

MATTHEW
Well. Here’s the thing. We kind of
need the review today.

She swallows.
MARLENE
Based on one dish?

Angelo reaches out for the plate.

ANGELO
If you don’t like the food, We’ll
toss it and never bother you again.

Marlene instinctively guards the food. Takes another bite.

MARLENE
It’ll be up by noon.

INT. RESTAURANT LOBBY – DAY

Matthew and Angelo pull the painting of sensual apples down.
They look at the blank spot on the wall.

MATTHEW
Sorry about tossing our portrait.

ANGELO
At least this tacky thing is going.

EXT. RESTAURANT – DAY

They carry it out the front door.

ANGELO AND MATTHEW
One. Two. Three!

The painting sails out into the street. A car runs over it.

INT. RESTAURANT LOBBY – DAY

Matthew and Angelo return, laughing and brushing off their
hands.

Lewis answers the phone.

LEWIS
Thank you for calling Brym-- sorry,
The Clumsy Mess. How can I help
you?

ANGELO
(to Matthew)
I do like that name.

Matthew shushes Angelo. Listens to Lewis’s call.
LEWIS
Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Well, I hope you have a good Valentine’s day anyway.

Lewis hangs up. Disappointed.

Matthew waits for an explanation.

LEWIS (CONT’D)
Another cancelation.

MATTHEW
I don’t get it. Marlene’s review should be out by now.

Angelo searches on his phone.

ANGELO
Here it is. “Will the second rebranding in two weeks bring Matthew back from the ashes? Check back at noon tomorrow to hear about the Clumsy Mess.”

MATTHEW
Tomorrow?! How does that help us? Read the comments.

Angelo scrolls through the comments.

MATTHEW (CONT’D)
Well?

Angelo shakes his head.

ANGELO
People don’t care about the review anyway. They’re moving on.

MATTHEW
Moving on?

ANGELO
The trendy are a fickle bunch. How are we looking for tonight, Lewis?

LEWIS
Still half full. On the plus side, a few of the old regulars called for reservations.
ANGELO
There you go. See? Once they see my cooking and your presentation, we’ll win them back.

Lewis answers another call.

MATTHEW
We’d better. Replacing the food stock just took every cent we could raise. We’ll just barely make it as long as nothing else goes wrong.

Lewis cups his hand over the phone. Looks at Matthew.

LEWIS
Um. Something just went wrong.

EXT. HIGHWAY – DAY

A TRUCK DRIVER paces on the side of the road, talking on his phone.

TRUCK DRIVER
It just appeared out of nowhere...
I told you! It was like a giant flaming monster in the middle of the road... No, I’m not high!

The Truck Driver hangs up his cell phone and looks over at his refrigerated truck, which rests on its side in the ditch.

Boxes of food spill out of its opened back doors.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN – DAY

The kitchen is nearly clean. Claire places racks back into a stove. Tre wipes the grill. Matthew mops.

Jess enters the kitchen. A hairband keeps her sweaty hair out of her eyes. Blue and white paint dots her painting shirt.

JESS
Where’s Angelo?

MATTHEW
Something happened with the truck. We need to help him unpack the food as soon as he gets back.

JESS
Okay. Come see our new look!
They all follow Jess out.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

Keith and Sarah wait proudly. The walls that had gone from stodgy, outdated beige to pretentious flashy red, are now a textured heritage blue with splashes of white.

Simple. Messy. Feels like a cozy modern home.

JESS
It’s the best we could do in one morning.

Matthew nods.

MATTHEW
We may not win the trendiest restaurant award, but I love it.

KEITH
I hoped you would. It was the only paint we could afford.

SARAH
By “afford,” he means “could find on FreeCycle.”

Matthew laughs.

MATTHEW
I don’t deserve you all.

They all nod in agreement.

CLAIRE
That’s for sure.

Matthew looks at Jess, who averts her eyes. His phone rings. He answers and paces while listening.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Angelo, cell phone cradled between his shoulder and ear, shoves a box of meat into his small car parked on the shoulder. There’s barely room left for him to sit.

Traffic crawls by behind him.

ANGELO
(into his cell phone)
It’s not good.
Angelo cranks the car’s air conditioning to full, then backs out. Looks over at the back of the refrigerated food delivery truck. He hardly made a dent.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

Matthew nods his head while the others listen anxiously.

MATTHEW
Uh huh. Uh huh.
(beat)
If that meat spoils, I’m finished.
(beat)
We’re on it.

He hangs up.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
The truck’s a write-off. Angelo needs help getting the food over here.

KEITH
Where is he?

MATTHEW
Exit thirty-nine. Can you all handle it while I finish up here?

KEITH
Of course!

The crew heads to their cars. Matthew holds Jess back. His eyes brim with tears.

MATTHEW
Jess, hey. You have to believe me about Brynn. I didn’t--

JESS

She squeezes his hand and then heads out.

Matthew watches them leave. Heads back to the...

INT. KITCHEN - DAY - CONTINUOUS

...and jumps at the sight of Owen waiting for him. Arms folded across his chest, fully dressed in his chef’s uniform.
Owen reaches for a pile of painting supplies. Dips a paintbrush into a can. Wave at the kitchen with the brush, flinging paint droplets in a wide arc across the appliances.

    OWEN
    I see you got your little minions back to work. Too bad you can’t pay them.

Matthew cringes.

    MATTHEW
    They’re my friends. They volunteered.

Owen makes an exaggerated shrug, flinging more paint.

    OWEN
    Good luck with that. Don’t get me wrong, I love slavery, but millennials just don’t want to work for free these days. In the long run, people only care about themselves.

    MATTHEW
    I’m not worried. I will pay you back, and then we’ll be back in business. Without you.

Owen waves his brush at the walk-in cooler. Paint speckles the door.

    OWEN
    How are you going to hold a banquet with no food?

    MATTHEW
    It’s coming.

Owen scoffs.

    OWEN
    Not if there was an... accident.

Matthew narrows his eyes.

    OWEN (CONT'D)
    Didn’t you hear? Big delivery truck accident on the highway. Turns out it was yours. What a shame.

Matthew steps toward Owen, angry.
MATTHEW
I should have figured that was you. Every single thing that’s gone wrong has been because of you.

OWEN
All I did was help you get what you wanted. You made all the decisions.

MATTHEW
Here’s a decision. Get out of my kitchen.

Owen reaches over to flick the handle of a knife on the counter. Light flickers off the sharp blade as it spins.

OWEN
Try to make me.

Matthew and Owen both lunge for the knife.

Matthew knocks the knife away from Owen. It slides across the counter and CLATTERS to the floor.

Owen grabs a pot handle. CLANG! Nails Matthew upside the head.

Matthew staggers back in pain. An orange glow reflects off his face. He looks through blurry eyes to see Owen turning on the gas burners one at a time. Flames leap up.

OWEN (CONT'D)
Maybe I should fire you.

Matthew backs away, but not quick enough.

Owen grabs Matthew’s collar and pulls him toward the hot grill.

Matthew struggles to push away. Flames inches from his face.

MATTHEW
You’re a monster!

OWEN
I’ve been called worse.

Matthew gropes blindly on the counter. He finds a spatula and starts smacking Owen’s face.

Owen lets go of Matthew to block the blows. They square off.

Owen dives for the knife on the floor.
Matthew tries to get there first but is too late. Owen comes up swinging with the knife.

Matthew blocks the attack. The spatula gets knocked from his hand. He backs away, tossing anything he can grab; dishes, utensils, spices, paint brushes.

Owen dodges them all.

Matthew throws a bag of flour.

Owen bats it out of the way. The bag bursts open. A cloud of flour dust hits the flames and blows up into a giant fireball that envelopes Owen.

Owen staggers back. His foot knocks over a can of paint thinner. It ignites. A fireball engulfs Owen and billows across the drop ceiling.

OVEN (CONT'D)
Aeieee!

Matthew’s jaw drops as Owen struggles to bat out the flames.

MATTHEW
Stop moving!

Matthew grabs the sprayer from a sink and turns on the water. Sprays and douses the flames.

Owen’s clothing and hair have burned away. Two small horns stick up from his bald head. His scalded skin now a deep red.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
I knew it! You are the devil!

With his disguise gone, the spreading inferno that surrounds Owen no longer bothers him. Owen laughs at Matthew.

OVEN
You know nothing! I am one of his legion, sent here to collect you.

MATTHEW
Well, you can’t have me!

Owen pulls out the contract from nowhere and holds it up.
OWEN
Oh, but I can. This contract says I already own forty-nine percent of “Matthew.” When you default on our loan at midnight tonight, the devil and I become your majority shareholders. There’s nothing you can do.

MATTHEW
I’ll get the money! We’ll make this banquet work without you.

OWEN
Not without a restaurant.

Owen flicks his wrist, and the fire ignites right back up.

A tub of mustard explodes from the heat of the flames. Matthew tries to knock back the fire with the sprayer, but it spreads too quickly.

Matthew looks around for an escape. Fire blocks the exit to the dining room, and Owen blocks the route to the back door.

MATTHEW
I’ll start a Go Fund Me.

OWEN
Hahahahaha! In one afternoon? Good luck! Your selfishness has driven away everyone who ever trusted you.

Burning ceiling tiles crash to the floor behind Owen. Matthew shields his face from the growing heat. Chokes on the smoke.

ANGELO (O.S.)
Matthew!

Owen covers himself as Angelo kicks the back door open.

MATTHEW
(coughing)
I still have some friends.

Owen disappears into the smoke, leaving Matthew alone and disoriented.

ANGELO
Matthew, over here!

Matthew crouches under the smoke and heads toward Angelo’s voice. He grabs Angelo’s hand and gets pulled along.
EXT. ALLEY - DAY

Matthew and Angelo stumble into the alley. Smoke pours out of the door behind them. Firetruck sirens wail in the background.

They both cough and gasp for fresh air.

    ANGELO
    What happened in there?

    MATTHEW
    I screwed up, Angelo. I screwed everything up.

Matthew cries.

Angelo puts his arm around Matthew and leads him away from the burning restaurant.

EXT. PARK - DAY

Owen watches the firefighters battle the flames from across the street. A hooded cloak hides his appearance. He speaks into a cell phone.

    OWEN
    He’s ours now.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Matthew sits on a curb with Angelo by the food packed car.

A PARAMEDIC finishes checking him over. Matthew escaped without serious injury.

    PARAMEDIC
    You’re lucky. No burns. No lung damage. If you’re still coughing tomorrow, make sure you go to the hospital.

Matthew nods.

The rest of the restaurant crew pulls up in a convoy of cars. Each packed to the roof with boxes of food.

Claire and Tre run up first. In shock at the firefight.

    TRE
    What the hell happened?
MATTHEW
You just said it. Hell. And I deserve it.

The others join the group.

CLAIRE
So, this is it then?

MATTHEW
Yep. No restaurant. No Banquet. At this point, I don’t even care about the money. I just wanted something good to come out of it. The only thing I have left is carloads of meat that’s about to spoil and no way to cook it.

ANGELO
What a shame. You know how many hungry people there are in this town?

Lewis looks at the burning restaurant.

LEWIS
We could get some long sticks and barbecue it on the flames.

KEITH
Dude.

LEWIS
I was trying to lighten the mood.

Matthew looks up, an idea forming. He looks over at Angelo, who suddenly gets it and smiles.

LEWIS (CONT'D)
What? Guys come on. I was kidding.

MATTHEW
Lewis. You said some locals called for reservations? You weren’t here. How did they call you?

Lewis holds up his cell phone.

LEWIS
They all have my cell in case they can’t get through to the restaurant.
ANGELO
How many of them do you think have barbecues?

EXT. RESTAURANT – LATER – DAY

The sun hangs low in the sky. Smoke rises from the ruins of the smoldering restaurant. Firefighters poke through the rubble to put out any remaining hotspots.

EXT. PARK – DAY

Out in the park’s clearing, several barbecues are already fired up, with Tre, Claire, and Angelo cooking.

Delores and her husband wheel up another propane grill.

ANGELO
Right over there, Delores. Thank you.

A stream of neighbors brings tables, chairs, and coolers.

The wait staff busily packs meat from the boxes into the coolers and sets tables.

A homeless man makes his way toward the grill where Angelo is cooking. Lewis rushes over.

LEWIS
Excuse me, sir. Sorry, this is a private event.

Matthew jumps in.

MATTHEW
It’s all right, Lewis. He’s from the shelter.

Angelo puts a barbecued chicken breast onto a plate.

ANGELO
We invited him.

Matthew dresses the plate with a green salad and grilled corn. Puts on an extra helping of barbecue sauce. Hands it to the homeless man.

HOMELESS MAN
Bless you.
MATTHEW
Make sure to tell your friends.

The Homeless Man heads over to a table. Jess greets him with a pitcher of lemon-aid. She smiles at Matthew.

Matthew smiles back.

LEWIS
We need money to pay off your loan. Maybe we can raise--

MATTHEW
--Lewis. I’ve made my peace. Right no only thing that matters, is cooking the hell out of this meat.

EXT. PARK TREELINE – NIGHT

Barbecue smoke fills the air. Visitors continue to arrive for their free Valentine’s Day dinner. Couples laugh together. Kids chase each other around. Music plays over a loudspeaker.

Owen watches from a distance with the Shadow Man.

OWEN
I told you we’d win.

SHADOW MAN
Why must you wallow in your ignorance?

Owen glances at his watch. Pulls the contract out.

OWEN
But, he can’t even sell a meal. In a few hours, he’s ours. The contract--

The Shadow Man snatches the paper from Owen.

SHADOW MAN
The contract is meaningless if he doesn’t believe it.

The contract burns up like flash paper.

SHADOW MAN (CONT’D)
How long have I tried to teach you? And you’ve still learned nothing. Man must damn himself. Nothing he does can be unforgiven if he chooses the right path.
OWEN
Forgive me then, master. I beg you.

Owen sinks to his knees. The Shadow Man points an accusing finger.

SHADOW MAN
You are already damned.

Owen cowers away.

OWEN
No. Please. It’s not my fault!

Flames erupt from the ground underneath Owen.

EXT. PARK CLEARING - NIGHT
A red explosion of fireworks by the trees shocks the crowd. Everyone erupts in cheers and applause.

Matthew turns to Angelo.

MATTHEW
Did you buy fireworks?

Angelo shakes his head no.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)
Huh.

They continue grilling.

FADE OUT.