

THUNDER & ASH

Feature Film Treatment By
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ACT ONE

We open on a terrible car crash at night on an old country road at a highway intersection outside a small Texas town. Both cars are badly mangled and crushed-in, with one catching fire. A young man, DANNY WESTON, is able to crawl out of one and survey the damage. It appears a couple in the opposing car have been killed. Danny, beaten and bloodied himself, calls for help.

13 years later, JOHN WESTON, 29 years old, is called and told of his brother Danny's death due to an epileptic seizure. John returns to his small Texas hometown for the first time in over a decade to pay his respects and handle his brother's affairs.

When he arrives, John is met with a who's-who of childhood friends, acquaintances, old loves, and family members. His cousin PATRICK WESTON. His Aunt LINDA WESTON. His brother's older friends; the town pastor ALBERTO THOMAS and burnout high school buddy FOXWORTH 'FOX' RAWLINS.

John greets his cousin and aunt before going to the local highway diner to eat. Here John meets ESPERANZA 'ESPIE' RAMOS, a beautiful, Hispanic teenage waitress, who tells him Danny was a regular of hers, visiting almost every day. After breakfast, John's cousin Patrick drives him around and shows him the dilapidated, dying town - now buoyed by what appears to be the drug trade. John asks who caused it and is told that the wildfires many years prior had destroyed the entire town and economy, leaving in their wake the rise of a criminal opportunist. John is told a name he's asked not to repeat: MOE CIRILLO.

The friend group (Fox, Alberto, Patrick, and others) gather at a local bar to revel in drinking and reminiscing with John about his late brother's legacy. John is told Danny, an ex-con, was well-liked and generous with his community- but also criticized for his connection to the increasing crime and violence associated with Moe Cirillo. It's clear Danny was a "fixer" and close right-hand to Cirillo. At the bar, John reconnects with the bartender, ex-girlfriend JEN WHITMORE, who he hasn't seen in years.

That night John goes to Danny's apartment for the first time and looks through his things. He finds several connections to Moe Cirillo and felon outreach programs. In the bedroom, John finds

a gun in a shoebox and an unsent letter addressed to him. He stows it away. Outside the window of the apartment he sees two men stalking him from the corner of the street, but lets it go. A problem for another day.

ACT TWO

John takes some of Danny's things back over to his aunt's house, where he reflects on old framed childhood photos of the two brothers and their father, DAN WESTON, SR. Linda notices this, and encourages John to go visit his father, who is assumed to be his only living parent. John resists, but his aunt tells him how much it would mean to her, and he agrees.

At a memory care facility on the edge of town, an ailing and delirious Dan Sr. is visited by John. The two share a comforting, poignant moment of connection before Dan Sr. tells John he loves him and that he's a good son for 'looking after his younger brother'. John realizes his father has mistaken him for Danny, and that he's unaware of the elder son's passing. John says nothing of it, and tells his father he loves him, too.

John heads to the Bank & Trust, where the town's accountant, MIKE MENDOZA, tells him he's been labeled the executor of Danny's will and informs him that his brother's account has \$178,000 saved in it, all intended for Espie Ramos. John is confused at first by this, but told by Mike that Espie Ramos is actually the adopted name of 'Isabella Rodriguez'. John knows this name and why Danny would leave him in-charge. He's reticent to share, and tells Mike he'll come back later.

At the old high school stadium, John stands by the bleachers and thinks about the past. In a flashback to 13 years prior, we see a young, teenage John with his older, 20-something brother Danny. Danny is handsome, charismatic, encouraging, and confident in a way that makes him instantly likable and endearing. The two brothers sit and drink beers on the bleachers together as they discuss John's college baseball scholarship to UT and watch the sunset. Danny jokingly laments his own inability to have pursued college athletics due to epilepsy, but congratulates John and urges him to go and leave the small town. John feels guilt about pursuing his future and abandoning his small community, leaving everyone behind - including Danny himself - to support their family. Danny dismisses the guilt and

assures him "Everybody's got a debt to pay." The two brothers laugh and take-in the country sunset together as they clink their bottles together in celebration. On the sound of the toasting, the flashback continues to the two brothers drinking and driving down a long, dark road back home, Danny in the driver's seat.

Back in present-day, John returns to the highway diner at night and sits at Espie's booth. He coldly drinks a mug of coffee and thinks carefully, looking at the young girl from afar with slight fear and astonishment. Espie asks him if he's OK. John says he's fine and leaves. On the night-drive back to Danny's apartment, a car pulls up to John at an intersection and two men, TROY HUNT and LUIS GONZALEZ, force him to exit the vehicle. John recognizes the pair as the same men that were stalking him earlier. They threaten John and badly beat him up, stating that Danny had been skimming money from Moe Cirillo and owed him a sizable debt. They demand John pay Cirillo nearly \$200,000 within 48 hours.

Beaten nearly unconscious, John drives in a pained stupor to the only place he can think of: His ex-girlfriend Jen's house. To his surprise and delight, she still lives in the same place. Jen receives John with frustration and hesitation, but lets him in and bandages him up. The two discuss the past and eventually sleep together. Jen tells John she used to think she loved him, but really only loved the idea of the boy she knew that ran away.

As they fall asleep together, John has a nightmarish dream of him and Danny driving and violently crashing a truck. As it progresses, it appears to be a flashback of an actual memory. Danny pulls himself out of the truck and heaves himself to his feet, walking over to the opposing car in the crash. The passengers in the front, a man and woman, are dead. A fire is rising on the car. From the backseat, the cries of a small child are heard. Danny limps his way over to the vehicle and heroically pulls a toddler out of the mashed-in backseat. A 2 to 3-year-old Hispanic baby girl, ISABELLA RODRIGUEZ. The lone survivor of the car. Danny holds the child close in his arms and cries out for help. The cry jolts John out of sleep.

He awakens to Jen hurriedly getting dressed in black the next morning. She urges him to get dressed as well, and the two race over to the church. It's Danny's funeral.

At the service, the pastor Alberto Thomas, an old friend of Danny's, recounts the paradoxical sides of the young man: A kind-hearted brother, son, and friend. An opportunistic criminal. A gentle, friendly disposition. An inner rage. Alberto asks the attendees to appreciate the imperfect man and think on the contradictions within their own character, before putting his friend to rest. At the cemetery, Troy and Luis approach John once more, this time threatening to hurt his family members - his aunt, his cousin, his father - but this time they add a name: Espie. This enrages John. He can't let it be.

John goes to the local police station and speaks to SHERIFF STEVE CLARK. John outlines the threats he's received and imminent danger his family is in, but is met with dismissal from Sheriff Clark, who recommends John pay Cirillo what he's owed. John realizes the police, too, work for Moe Cirillo. They can't help. But maybe he can.

ACT THREE

With no one to protect his family, John realizes he must either confront Cirillo himself or once again run away and leave the town behind. John sits in Danny's apartment, looking at the lived-life and memory of his brother from his space, burdened with fear, anger, and guilt. He calls Troy and has him set a meeting the next night with Moe Cirillo at the old feed store - the headquarters of the mob-like boss - to pay him back. John grabs Danny's letter and gun and returns to the church. At the empty church, John sits in a pew alone. He thinks, he prays, he seeks clarity and perhaps forgiveness.

We return to our flashback 13 years ago from a different perspective. We now see John in the driver's seat of the vehicle, not Danny, swerving, drinking, and laughing down a long dark country road. The two brothers barrel down the road, speeding, until they hit a highway intersection where - SMASH. Their truck collides with another car in horrific fashion. The impact immediately slams John into the steering wheel and knocks him unconscious. Danny, in the passenger seat, can't get out of his door. He painfully slides over John, falling out the driver's side, and uses

all of his energy and might to pull his brother out of the wreckage and clear of the road. Danny then crawls to his feet in great pain and returns to the opposing car. He pulls the toddler, Isabella (Espie), out of the destroyed vehicle as it catches fire. He holds the baby girl in his arms and cries out for help to the dark, empty surroundings. Nothing. Danny knows what he has to do. He gains his composure, taking a deep breath and opening his flip phone to call 911. On the phone, Danny tells police there's been a fatality, and that he was driving - taking the blame and fall for his younger brother and, essentially, damning himself to years in prison. This is the real truth of the past and secret the two brothers share.

Back to present-day. In the church, John opens Danny's letter and begins reading it. It opens with a familiar phrase and chilling reminder: "Everybody's got a debt to pay." He realizes Danny has been saving money while working for Moe Cirillo for years to give to the lone survivor of their terrible accident: Espie, now a teenager working in the diner. John is overcome with the weight of responsibility, regret, and the consequences of his own actions he's now watching play-out over a decade later. The emotion overwhelms him and he looks to the heavens to apologize to his departed brother. "I'm sorry."

Back at the town Bank & Trust Mike Mendoza prepares paperwork and stacks of cash for John, who arrives with two large duffel bags and begins filling them.

John then returns to Jen's house, where he relays the real account of the car accident and the truth of the past to her. Ashamed, John confesses he feels he's wasted his life and the opportunity his brother's sacrifice gave him - and the less he accomplished as an adult, the harder it became to return home. Jen tells him to stop pretending like life is simply happening to him and acting like a victim, because he isn't one. She reinforces that his home would always be there for him, regardless of what he does with his life. And that Danny, like him, made his choices for a reason. The real victim is the town, itself. The words are sobering.

Espie is sitting at home with her adopted Grandmother, doing homework. She hears a knock at the door and goes to open it. We assume it's John, but don't see. As night falls once more on the small town, John drives out on the very same old country road his fateful accident occurred, through the burned trees and ghostly countryside toward the old feed store. He's made his decision.

We finally meet Moe Cirillo, a middle-aged man with dark, greying hair in a disheveled, western-themed suit, as he arrives at the old feed store. He's immediately a magnetic personality: an entertaining storyteller with an unpredictable mood and a well-conveyed sense of power. Cirillo is the boss, and he knows it. He passionately regales John in a story of the failing town, destroyed by raging wildfires and economic downturn while John has been absent, and the resentment and desperation that grew out of the rebuilding of the burned-down community. Cirillo tells John that before he controlled the town all the people were left with after the fire was "thunder and ash". Cirillo takes a perverse pride in ravaging the town with crime, believing in his own way that he has saved it from complete ruin by making it a drug outpost between the cartels to the south and his own east coast bosses to the north.

John tells Cirillo of Danny's sacrifice, and that his criminal trajectory started with his decision at the accident. Cirillo isn't surprised, and states that Danny was his best asset in the town, dutifully carrying-out his wishes, which is why he was shocked to find that he was secretly taking money from him for years. Cirillo infers, very vaguely, that he had something to do with Danny's death, who he knew was epileptic. The information is a gut-punch to John, who holds his composure as best he can.

We return to the church from earlier, John opens Danny's letter and begins reading it. The note is narrated by the voice of Danny. "Everybody's got a debt to pay." In successive montage we go back earlier in the day, as John makes amends and says goodbyes to everyone in the town over Danny's narrated letter. John fills duffel bags with cash and shakes hands with Mike Mendoza. He visits and says

goodbye to his father. He hugs and says farewell to his cousin and friends. He embraces and thanks his aunt. He grabs Danny's keys from his apartment and pulls a cover off of his old Ford Bronco. He tosses the duffel bags in it. And, finally, he bids goodbye to Jen. On the close of this montage, Danny's narration concludes. "Everybody's got a cross to bear."

Back to the feed store, present-day. Cirillo and John sit across from one another. John takes a deep breath and calmly re-centers himself. John tells Cirillo he used to play with his friends at the back of the feed store as a kid. He went to 1st grade with the goon who frisked him at the door. His second cousin is who loads Cirillo's gun. His old neighbor was the guard at the front. He tells Cirillo he spent years thinking he had walked away from everyone and tried to forget them, but now realized none of them had ever - or would ever - do the same to him. Cirillo looks uncharacteristically alarmed, and quickly reaches for his pistol. Before he can, John pulls Danny's gun from his jacket and shoots Cirillo in the chest. One shot. A flash and a bang ring-out, and Cirillo is killed.

On the sound of Cirillo's body dropping to its side with a thud, we return back to the knock on Espie's door. She answers it, but no one is there. At her feet on the porch, however, are two large duffels, the very same from the bank, filled with cash. Nearly \$178,000. On top of the bags there is a letter addressed to her. She looks at it, tearfully, then back up to the empty abyss of her surrounding neighborhood.

Sunrise. The old Ford Bronco, Danny's car, takes off down a long country road with John at the wheel. The lone vehicle rides into the sunset. John's voice now, not Danny's, narrates a closing line: "Everybody's got a debt to pay."

THE END