

Excerpt from *Lights Out*

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The day Jake Thomas came home to Brooklyn, Jake's parents, who still lived three houses down from Ryan Rossetti and his parents in Canarsie, hung out a huge banner connected to trees on either side of the street, which read:

WELCOME HOME JAKE, OUR HERO.

Ryan had to drive right under the banner on his way to work, which wouldn't have been such a big deal if "J.T. fever" hadn't been sweeping through the neighborhood all week. It seemed like everyone was wearing THOMAS 24 jerseys and Pirates hats, and hundreds of cars proudly displayed BROOKLYN LOVES JAKE bumper stickers, a giveaway from a Ralph Avenue dealership. Some stores had posted eight-by-ten glossies of Jake in their windows, and Pete's Barber shop on Avenue N was giving free shaves to anyone who showed a Jake Thomas baseball card. Pizzerias, restaurants, bars, delis, and even a nail salon had their own Jake Thomas specials, and the *Canarsie Courier* was running a cover story about Jake called "Brooklyn's Son Returns," so Ryan had to see an annoying picture of Jake—smiling widely with his fake choppers—in newspaper dispensers everywhere.

Ryan cranked the volume on his Impala's CD player, shouting out lyrics of Nelly's "Hot in Herre." A few minutes later he double-parked in front of a deli on Flatlands and went inside for his usual ham-and-egg on a roll and black coffee with four sugars. At the register, Andre, the high school kid who worked there, said, "Jake Thomas home yet?"

"Dunno," Ryan said, shaking his head as he dug into his pocket for money, although he'd already put a five on the counter.

"Yo, you hear? There's gonna be a block party for him later."

"Really?" Ryan said, playing dumb. Jake's mother had been planning the surprise party for weeks, and Ryan's mother had been up late last night cooking five trays of her famous lasagna.

"Yeah. Eighty-first Street's gonna be closed off. Gonna be free food, music, dancing, all that shit."

"Oh, right," Ryan said. "I think I did hear something about that."

"I'm goin', man," Andre said. "Gonna meet J.T. up close, shake his hand, get my picture taken with the NL batting champ. Yo, you think if I bring him a bat he'd sign it for me?"

"Why not?" Ryan took his change and returned to his car. Several minutes later he pulled into the driveway of a house on Whitman Drive in Mill Basin. Leaving the CD player on, he ate his breakfast, but when he was finished eating he didn't get out of his car. He always told himself that if he turned off the CD player or radio in the middle of a song it would mean bad luck. So he waited for the last lyric of the Mobb Deep joint and then, timing it perfectly, shut the ignition.

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Carlos and Franky were already setting up the drop cloths downstairs when Ryan entered the house. In the bathroom, Ryan changed out of his street clothes—a sleeveless T-Mac jersey over a plain black hooded sweatshirt, baggy Pepe jeans, a San Antonio Spurs baseball-style cap worn sideways over a black do-rag, and not new but very clean Nike Zoom LeBron IIs—into his white painting clothes and old paint-covered sneakers, and then returned to the living area and started helping Carlos and Franky with the wall repair.

It was the second day on this job and it was going to be a tough one. The house was average-size—three bed, two bath—but the old owners must not have painted in years, because there was peeling paint everywhere, and lots of bubbles needed to be sanded down. Ryan and the other guys had spent all day yesterday scraping and spackling and they'd gotten through only half of the downstairs. The upstairs wasn't in as bad shape so there was a shot they could start laying on the primer by the end of the day.

Ryan got to work, spackling, when Carlos said to him, "Jake Thomas come home yet?"

Carlos was Ryan's age—twenty-four—with a thin mustache and tuft of hair on his chin. He'd been asking Ryan about Jake all week, and Ryan had been trying not to pay too much attention.

"Dunno," Ryan said without looking at Carlos.

"But he's coming today, right?"

"Guess so."

"What?"

"I think so," Ryan said, louder.

"Hey," Carlos said. "If I bring you a ball in tomorrow, you think you can get J.T. to sign it for me?"

"Don't bust chops," Franky said. He was a big guy, a few years older than Carlos and Ryan.

"It ain't for me, man," Carlos said. "It's for my little cousin—he loves baseball. I told him I work with Jake Thomas's homeboy; he was like, 'Hook me up, yo.'"

"There's gonna be a party for him later on my block," Ryan said. "Why don't you stop by if you want an autograph?"

"I don't know the guy, man," Carlos said. "I don't wanna go up to him and be like, 'Gimme your autograph.' Come on, man, do me this one favor. It ain't for me—it's for my cousin. He's, like, eight years old and shit."

"He can't get everybody autographs," Franky said. "He probably's gotta get autographs for a thousand guys already, right, Ry?"

"It's all right," Ryan said, working the scraper hard against the wall. "Bring the ball in tomorrow and I'll ask Jake to sign it."

"Thanks, man," Carlos said. Then he said to Franky, "See? It ain't no big deal."

They worked for a while without talking. Carlos's box in the corner was playing top forty—Avril Lavigne's new song.

Then Franky said, "So where's he coming in from?"

Ryan knew Franky was talking about Jake, but he pretended to be lost.

"Who?" Ryan asked.

"Jake Thomas," Franky said.

“Oh,” Ryan said. “Pittsburgh, I guess.”

“He got an apartment there or something?”

“I think he rents a house,” Ryan mumbled.

“What?”

“He rents a house,” Ryan said louder.

“Probably a friggin’ mansion,” Franky said. “The guy’s gotta be making, what, a couple mil a year now, and wait till he’s a free agent—he’ll break the fuckin’ bank. The Pirates sucked this year, but Jake was freakin’ spectacular. What’d he end up at, three fifty-three?”

“Three fifty-one,” Carlos said.

“Three fifty-one,” Franky said. “Jesus, that’s like a DiMaggio number. And he had, like, twenty-five homers, hundred ribees.”

“He got twenty-two jacks,” Carlos said.

“Twenty-two home runs,” Franky said. “And what’d he get last year, twenty?”

“Seventeen,” Carlos said.

“That’s all right,” Franky said. “At least the numbers are goin’ up. And the guy steals bases and’s got that rifle arm. You see that one they showed on ESPN last week, when he threw out the guy trying to go first to third on that ball in the gap?”

“Yeah, ’gainst the Cubs,” Carlos said.

“The guy’s got a fuckin’ gun,” Franky said. “I swear that ball was, like, five feet off the ground the whole way. I bet he could’ve been a pitcher if he wanted.” He turned to Ryan and said, “Hey, J.T. ever pitch in high school?”

“Little bit,” Ryan said.

“Who was better, you or him?” Carlos asked.

“Me,” Ryan said confidently.

“You ever pitch to him in a game?”

“Little League, intra-squad—shit like that.”

“You struck him out?”

“Sometimes.”

“But he got some rips off you too, right?”

“Sometimes.”

“Hey, you think J.T. is gonna make the Hall someday?” Franky asked.

“Keeps playin’ the way he is he’s gonna,” Carlos said.

“Look at the numbers he’s puttin’ up,” Franky said. “You gotta admit those’re Hall of Fame numbers. Guy hits what, three fifty-one last year? Jesus.”

Carlos and Franky continued talking about how great Jake, was and Ryan tried to block out the noise, thinking about Christina. She looked so beautiful last night in the backseat of his car, with the lamppost light in her eyes. But then, before he dropped her off, she started crying. He really should throw her a call to make sure she was okay.

Then he snapped out of his thoughts when Franky said, “Hey, Ry, you think J.T. is gonna come play in New York someday?”

“How the hell should I know?” Ryan said, wishing they’d shut up already.

“I don’t know,” Franky said, “I thought maybe he said something about it to you or something.”

“We don’t talk a lot these days,” Ryan said.

“Still,” Franky said, “the guy musta said *something*. I mean, any guy grows up in Brooklyn, his dream’s gotta be to play for the Yankees or the Mets. And after next year he’s gonna be a free agent.”

“Pass the spackle, will ya?” Ryan said.

Ryan tossed his finished container of spackle aside, then took the new one from Franky. Carlos started telling Franky about how he went to get his car fixed yesterday and the guy tried to charge him three hundred bucks for an oil change and a new muffler, and Ryan thought, *Good, no more talking about goddamn Jake*. Then, after Carlos said he was thinking about selling his car anyway, putting an ad in *Buy-Lines*, Franky said, “That’d be something, having a guy from the neighborhood playing for a New York team. I bet he’d be the best player in the history of Brooklyn.”

“What about Sammy Koufax?” Carlos said.

“*Sandy Koufax, you fuckin’ moron*,” Franky said, “and he was a pitcher. I’m talkin’ about a hitter. What hitter in the history of Brooklyn is better than Jake Thomas?”

“Nobody,” Carlos said.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about,” Franky said.

Ryan couldn’t take it anymore. He left the scraper and the spackle on the floor and headed toward the front door.

“Where you goin’?” Franky said.

“Taking a break,” Ryan said.

“But you just got here.”

Ryan left the house. He went to his car and took out a pack of Camels from the glove compartment. He lit up, leaning against the side of the car, when he saw Tim’s pickup coming down the block.

Tim O’Hara, the owner of Pay-Less Painting, was only thirty-five, but he was doing pretty good for himself. He had four crews of three guys doing painting jobs around Brooklyn, and he’d recently bought a nice house—three bedrooms, a garage—near Marine Park. He used to help out painting, but now he was a pure contractor, going out and bidding on jobs, and getting guys to work for him for ten bucks an hour. Tim was a good guy, and he and Ryan always got along, but Ryan still planned to start his own business someday. He figured he could put ads in papers and bid on jobs as easily as Tim could, and he could be just as successful. All he needed was a chunk of change to start out with. He’d already put away two thousand bucks, but he felt he needed at least five as a cushion and for start-up costs. He was also saving to move out of his parents’ house and, eventually, buy a ring for Christina, so he expected to work for Tim for at least a couple more years.

Tim double-parked the pickup, then got out and approached Ryan. Tim was about Ryan’s height—five-ten—and his reddish brown hair was receding on the sides.

“Gotta quit that shit,” Tim said.

“You only live once,” Ryan said.

“So you wanna live to forty?”

Ryan took a long drag on the cigarette and let the smoke out very slowly through his nostrils.

“So how’s it going?” Tim asked.

“Good.” Then Ryan realized Tim meant the painting job. “Coming along.”

“You think you guys can finish up in three days?” Tim asked.

“That’s pushing it,” Ryan said. “There’s a lot of wall repair to do in there—specially downstairs.”

“Cause I got another job for you to do—three-story house, Midwood—big job. Might be a four- or five-dayer. How about four days?”

“Dunno,” Ryan said. “Talk to the guys.”

Tim went into the house and Ryan stayed outside, finishing the cigarette. It was a nice fall day—sunny, in the sixties.

A few minutes later, when Ryan went inside, Tim was in the living room saying, “...but it looks like you guys’re doing a really great job in here. Seriously, you’re putting my other crews to shame. I was just at this other job in Sheepshead Bay, and Jimmy, Rob, and that new kid I hired, Benny—they’re goin’ on a week and they’re just putting on the second coat today. And it’s not a big job neither—two bedrooms, one bath. Benny—I swear to God on my grandmother’s grave—he painted himself into a closet yesterday.”

“You’re shittin’ me,” Franky said.

“Cross my heart, hope to die,” Tim said. “Jimmy told me all about it. He comes back from his lunch break and hears the kid screaming, ‘Lemme outta here, lemme outta here!’”

Franky and Carlos started laughing. Ryan thought it was funny too, but he wasn’t in the mood to laugh. He got busy spackling.

“They had to use the scraper to get him outta there,” Tim said.

“What a fuckin’ idiot,” Franky said

“Nah, Benny’s a good kid,” Tim said. “He just doesn’t have all the seeds in his apple, if you know what I mean.”

“But come on, to paint yourself into a closet,” Franky said, “you gotta be a fuckin’ retard.”

“He’s lucky they found him in there,” Carlos said. “It was five o’clock, his ass coulda been stuck there all night.”

“Imagine that shit,” Franky said. “They show up the next day and find the stupid kid there, still screaming to get out. That woulda been a fuckin’ riot.”

Franky started laughing. He had a loud, infectious laugh, and Carlos and Tim joined in. Even Ryan smiled a little.

“But seriously,” Tim said, “what I was saying before—you guys are the best crew I have. I really mean that. You always do quality work, and I know when I assign you a job you’ll finish it on time.”

“So you gonna give us a bonus, boss?” Carlos asked.

“Yeah, how ’bout a not-painting-ourselves-into-a-closet bonus?” Franky said.

Franky and Carlos laughed again.

“Tell you what I’ll do,” Tim said. “You guys finish this job in four days so you can get started on that new one in Midwood, I’ll give you an extra fifty bucks apiece.”

“Aw right!” Carlos shouted.

“A Hawaii five-O sounds cool to me,” Franky said.

“But don’t rush it,” Tim said. “Remember, it’s quality over quantity. I’d rather do ten jobs well than twelve jobs not so well, you know what I mean?”

“Don’t worry,” Carlos said. “We’ll do a good job *and* we’ll get it done in four days.”

“What about you, Ry?” Tim asked.

Busy smoothing out spackle, Ryan said, “What?”

“You think four days is doable?” Tim said.

“Yeah,” Ryan said. “Why not?”

“Way to go, guys,” Tim said. He started toward the door; then he stopped and said, “Jesus, I almost forgot. Hey, Ry—your buddy Jake Thomas come home yet?”

Ryan waited a few seconds, grinding his back teeth, then said calmly, “I really don’t know, Tim.”

“I think he’s gettin’ sick of that question,” Franky said.

“What’re you talking about?” Ryan snapped. “I’m not sick of anything. I just don’t know if he’s home yet, that’s all. Who’m I, his mother?”

“Testy, ain’t we?” Franky said. “You sound like my friggin’ girlfriend. What’s it, that time of the month again, Justine?”

Carlos laughed.

Tim said to Ryan, “I don’t wanna impose on the guy or anything, but you think if I give you a baseball card tomorrow you can get it signed for me?”

“Sure,” Ryan said. “I mean, I’ll ask him to.”

“Damn,” Carlos said. “My man Ryan’s gonna have a lotta shit to get signed!”

“Hey, if it’s too much trouble...” Tim said.

“It’s no big deal,” Ryan said. “Bring in the card tomorrow; I’ll give it to Jake.”

“Cool,” Tim said. “And great work here again, guys.”

Tim left, then Carlos said, “Come on, man, let’s get our asses to work—I want that fifty bucks.”

“Don’t worry,” Franky said. “All we gotta do is finish the wall repair by lunchtime and we could have the whole house primed by tonight. We do the first coat tomorrow, the second coat the next day, and we still got a whole day left over.”

“I’m not rushing the job,” Ryan said.

“Who said we gonna rush it?” Carlos said. “We just gonna work fast, that’s all.”

“What’s the matter,” Franky said to Ryan, “you don’t wanna get the bonus?”

“It’s fifty bucks,” Ryan said. “It’s nothing to get a boner over.”

“So if I gave you a fifty-dollar bill you’d rip it up right now?” Franky asked.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Ryan said. “You heard what Tim said—quality over quantity. I’m not gonna slap on the paint for fifty fuckin’ bucks.”

“What’s wrong with you anyway?” Franky said. “All day—no, all week, you been acting like you got a big fat dick up your ass.”

Ryan dropped the scraper and took a step toward Franky. He wasn’t really going to go after him; he just wanted to make a point.

“Come on, chill, y’all, chill,” Carlos said. “Yo, maybe Ry’s right. We’ll take it easy, yo—do up all the wall repair today and get on the primer. If we just don’t fuck around and bullshit, we’ll get this house down in four days, no problem. So just everybody let’s just chill and get to workin’, what y’all say?”

For several seconds Ryan and Franky remained facing each other, and then they started working again. Usher was singing “Yeah,” and Ryan climbed to the top of the stepladder to work on a big crack near the ceiling when his beeper went off. He glanced at the readout—**CHRISSY WORK**—and got down off the ladder and headed toward the front door.

“Another fuckin’ break?” Franky said.
Ryan went outside, took out his cell, and called Christina.
“I was so glad it was you,” Ryan said. “I was thinking about you before.”
“Where are you?” Christina asked. She sounded like she’d been crying again.
“Work, where do you think? You okay?”
“Is Jake home yet?”
“You know how many times I got asked that question today?”
“Is he?”
“I have no idea.”
“I’m scared.”
“Don’t be. You’re gonna do great tonight—I guarantee it. And just remember—I love you.”
“Shit, I gotta go. Dr. Hoffman needs me for a root canal.”
“Hey, I just said I love you.”
“I love you too.” Christina waited a few moments, then said, “I don’t think I can do it.”
Ryan rolled his eyes. “You gotta do it, Chrissy—it’s the perfect time.”
“Why? I mean, why can’t you just come over tonight and we’ll stay locked in my house till he leaves? I’ll leave a message at his parents’ house, say I’m sick—I have the flu.”
“We’re not doing that.”
“Why not? I’ll take off from work tomorrow and we can stay in my room all day and—”
“We gotta take care of this thing tonight, get on with our lives.”
“I know, I know, but—”
“You’re not gonna chicken out on me, are you?”
The line was silent for a while, and then Christina said, “Come by my house after work—I have to see you first.”
“You wanna do this or not?”
“Of course I wanna do it.”
“Then just go to Jake’s tonight and—”
“Let’s go together.”
“I really don’t think that’s a good idea.”
“I need you there with me. Just show up with me, then you can leave.”
“Why can’t you—”
“Please,” she said. “If you’re there...I don’t know...I’ll feel more comfortable. You don’t even have to come in. You can just wait outside. He won’t even see you.”
Ryan shook his head, knowing he’d give in, but waited a while anyway before he said, “Fine, but then you’re gonna do this tonight, just like we planned it. No backing out.”
“Coming,” Christina said to someone. Then she said to Ryan, “I’ll see you later....I love you so much.”
“I love you too,” Ryan said, but Christina had hung up.
Ryan remained on the stoop, lighting another cigarette. After taking a couple of long drags he stomped out the butt and went back into the house.