

Fighting Redemption

❧ BONUS CHAPTER ❧

Warning: The following chapter takes place between the end of the final chapter and the epilogue and **contains spoilers**. If you have not yet read Fighting Redemption, please do not continue

“Fin! Hurry up! The car’s here!” Rachael shouted down the hallway of the cottage.

Sitting on the edge of her bed, she shouted back, “Five minutes!”

“I’m timing you!”

Ignoring Rachael’s demands, Fin returned to Jake’s letter, trailing her finger down the worn page. Her eyes were swimming and she blinked hard, fighting the tears. How could it be this long and she still felt the loss like it was yesterday? She could still see him grinning at her, teasing her, bossing her around. Memories of their life together flooded her until the ache became unbearable, but in this particular moment there was one memory that hurt the most. Fin closed her eyes, bringing it to life in her mind.

“*Alright.*” Her mum walked out of the kitchen, her narrowed eyes meaning business. Dusting her hands off, she focused on Jake, Ryan and Fin as they lounged on the floor of the living room. It was Saturday afternoon and just back

from the beach, they were huddled on the floor eating hot chips and watching a movie. *“Who ate the brownies?”*

“Fin did,” Jake garbled around a mouthful of food.

“Jake did,” Fin replied at the same time.

Julie arched a brow at Ryan. *“I ate them,”* he told her.

“I didn’t think you liked macadamia nuts, Ryan? Yet you ate the whole pan?”

Jake threw him a warning glare, and Ryan scratched awkwardly at his head. Fin fought the urge to giggle, knowing what was coming next. *“They tasted good with the chocolate, so I guess I like them now.”*

Fin glanced quickly at her mother before smirking at Jake, knowing he was done for. He always got the blame first. It was one of the hazards of being a big brother.

“Well that’s funny,” her mum replied with raised brows, *“because the brownies didn’t have any macadamia nuts in it.”*

“Shit,” Jake muttered and tossed a chip at Ryan’s head.

“Jake Michael Tanner.” Her mum put her hands on her hips. *“If you think you can pull the wool over my eyes, then think again. I’m your mother, and in this house that means I’m the second coming. For that you can go mow the lawn right now, and when you’re done with that, you can wash up and come help me cook dinner.”*

“But, Mum—”

“I don’t want to hear another word from you,” she interrupted, her voice pure steel, and walked back into the kitchen.

“Mum! It wasn’t me. It was Fin!” he yelled at her retreating back.

Jake turned his furious gaze on Fin and panic flooded her veins at the knowledge she was the one now done for. It hadn’t really been Jake that ate the brownies—it had been her, Rachael, and Laura on a mad chocolate binge that morning. Fin scrambled backwards from her cross-legged position on the floor when he lunged at her, right through the late lunch they were seated around. Chips flew all over the carpet, leaving messy trails of tomato sauce in their wake.

“Jake! I’m sorry,” she squealed. *“I’ll go tell her it was me.”*

Missing, he lunged again and Fin scooted quickly out of his reach. Grabbing the tomato sauce bottle in desperation, she aimed it at him.

Eyes narrowed, he growled, "*Don't you dare.*" She squeezed, at the last minute realising it was his favourite *signed* AC/DC shirt.

Red sauce oozed a deadly, ominous line all down the middle of his prized possession, somehow finishing with a final dot, almost like an exclamation mark.

"*Uh, Fin?*" she heard Ryan say from somewhere beyond her panicked haze. "*I think you better—*"

"*You bitch!*" Jake shouted and leaped at her, tackling her to the floor.

"*—run,*" Ryan finished.

"*Arrrrghhh,*" she garbled, her face squashed into the scratchy carpet via Jake's elbow. His heavy weight pinned her to the floor and she sucked in a breath. Feeling around on the floor blindly, Fin found a handful of chips. Picking them up, she mashed them into his face.

Jake gasped, frozen for a minute. Warm, oozy potato covered half his right eye, all across his cheek, and into his blond hair.

Fin giggled.

Then he fisted her shirt in one hand and grabbed his own handful of chips. Knowing what was coming, she frantically tried to buck him off. Gasping with laughter, she cried, "*No! Jake! I'm sorry,*" before breaking into another fit of giggles.

Jake squished the chips into her face before rubbing them all through her hair like shampoo.

Suddenly his weight left her body and she sat up, wiping potato out of her eyes so she could see. Ryan had hold of him from behind, his arms hooked around Jake's waist as Jake struggled to break free for another attack.

"*What on earth!*" she heard her mother cry.

Uh oh.

They all froze.

Fin's mum was staring open-mouthed at the scene before her, the horror on her face telling Fin the final straw hadn't just been reached, it had been snapped clean in two.

"Fin fell into the chips," Jake stammered, no doubt hoping to put Fin's clumsiness to best use. She couldn't fault him for it. It had come in handy on numerous occasions in the past. *"I was just helping her."*

Her mum's nostrils flared for several ominous moments as she breathed deeply. *"Fin. Clean up this mess. I want this room spotless. Jake—"*

Jake put his hands up in surrender, starting to back away. *"Lawns. Mowed. On it."*

"I need a drink," Fin heard her mother mutter as she left again for the kitchen.

Pressing her lips together, Fin faced Jake. *"Sorry. I'll mow the lawns if you like,"* she offered.

His gaze moved from his ruined shirt to her, his lips curving into a smile that spelled pure evil. *"It's okay, Fin. I'll mow the lawns..."* her brows flew up in surprise until he finished with, *"...but don't think that I'll forget you ruining my shirt. If some poor sap ever decides to marry you, then be warned. I'll be there, waiting somewhere you'll least expect it, sauce bottle in hand, and no miracle will save your pretty white wedding dress from the wrath I'll rain down on it."*

"Fin!" Rachael yelled, startling her out of the memory.

Choking on a sob, Fin folded her letter with painstaking care. Standing up, she tucked it inside her trinket box by the bedside table and walked to the mirror on the back of the wardrobe door. "But you're not here like you said you would be, Jake," she murmured sadly, smoothing a hand down the ivory vintage lace of her wedding gown before gazing at her reflection, "and right now I'd give anything to have you laughing at me, saying, 'You remember that time I threatened to take out your wedding dress with tomato sauce?' And I'd say, 'At the time, Jake, I really believed you'd have done it.'"

Fin closed her eyes, sucking in a sharp, trembling breath when Jake's voice came to her softly. "And I'd say, 'I didn't need that stupid shirt anyway,' and 'I'd take a million ruined shirts just to watch you in your pretty wedding dress, walking down the aisle to marry the only man who was ever worthy of you.'"

"Jake," she whispered, her voice hoarse as she fought against the desperate ache inside her. *Oh God, Jake. I need you here. Your strong arms squeezing me in a hug until I fear I'll burst. I need you so much I can't bear it.*

"I'm always here," came the soft, cool reply, and with her eyes shut tight she could almost believe he really *was* standing right beside her on one of most special days of her life.

The door clicked open and Fin spun around, expecting Rachael to barge through, but her mother stood there, jaw trembling as her eyes ran the length of Fin. "Honey, everyone's waiting on you. Are you ready?"

Drawing a deep breath, Fin nodded and turned back to the mirror. "I just wish ..." Her eyes found her mother in the mirror when she walked over and stood behind her.

"I know," her mum murmured and reached up to adjust one of the daisy's in Fin's long blonde hair. It had been swept loosely off her face with pins and fresh flowers, the rest left to tumble down her back in tousled waves. She turned Fin around and placed warm, gentle hands on her shoulders. "He'd be so proud of you. We all are, but Jake ... he ... he ..." Her mother swallowed visibly.

"Mum."

Exhaling audibly, she continued, "He thought the world of his little sister. Remember what Jake asked you to do whenever you thought of him? Smile, Fin. Today's your wedding day," she said in a firm voice. Plucking the daisy bouquet from the study nook in the corner, she handed it over. "Ryan's waiting for you."



“Give me a fist bump, little man,” Kyle said to Jacob. Ryan turned from buttoning the jacket of his military dress uniform to watch Kyle grab Jacob’s fist and bump it with his own.

The men were all getting ready in Jake’s old room in the Tanner household. Ryan’s old bed had long since gone, but Jake’s was still there. It was where Jacob slept when he stayed overnight at his grandparents’ house. It was supposed to be so he and Fin could enjoy time together, but all they did was miss him until he was home again. It was worth it, though. Despite being an exhausting whirlwind at almost three years old, Jacob helped ease the loss in Mike and Julie’s hearts and return some of the light to their eyes.

“Ready for a big party today?” Kyle asked Jacob.

Jacob shouted a loud yes and giggled when Kyle attacked his belly, finding all Jacob’s ticklish spots.

Ryan tried to smile but it fell a little flat because his chest was tight enough to leave him short of breath. He was about to marry the only girl who was ever meant to be his, and he needed a fucking drink. He’d already lost her too many times for the ache to disappear. Soon she would be watching him leave all over again. With Ryan being deployed again in two weeks, their honeymoon was put on hold. Leaving for Afghanistan used to fire his blood with excitement, but now that he was leaving behind a wife and child it only deepened the cracks in his heart.

Kyle picked up Ryan’s son and rested him on his hip. Jacob began grabbing at the medals pinned to his uniform as Kyle turned his attention to Ryan, asking, “You ready?”

Exhaling shakily, Ryan nodded at his best man.

Kyle cocked his head slightly, and Ryan knew his attempts to hide his nerves had not gone unnoticed. “I know if Jake were here I wouldn’t be standing in this position, but—”

“Brooks,” Ryan interrupted, his brows drawing together. He knew Jake should’ve been here to be his best man. It was how it was *supposed* to happen, but

life always had other plans, and right now those plans could all go fuck themselves because his best friend wasn't *here* and he would never get over it.

"Let me finish," Kyle said loudly. "But I want to say it's always been an honour to stand with you on and off the field, and to stand beside you today when frankly we all know you're punching above your weight. Fin could've done way better."

Ryan laughed, his chest easing a little. Reaching for Jacob, he hugged his boy tightly before settling him in his arms. "Like you?" he asked dryly before pressing a kiss into his son's hair. Breathing him in, Ryan let it soothe his ache.

Kyle jabbed his finger at Ryan. "Exactly, but no woman will ever pin *me* down," he replied with a smirk as Mike walked in the room.

"You don't know what you're missing, Brooks," Mike quipped.

"I'm sorry, sir, but all the Tanner women are taken, so I lucked out. But," he added with a smirk, "I'll be sure to ask Mrs. Tanner for a dance tonight. Maybe I can win her away."

Mike eyes narrowed. "I'll have my eye on you tonight. Consider yourself warned." Ryan laughed and Mike turned his way. "You think that's funny, son?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Laugh it up, chuckles," Mike replied to Ryan, "but my little girl is the prettiest of the bunch. Don't think you don't have your own battles ahead." Reaching over, he ruffled Jacob's soft, dark curls. "Heya, little champ. Looking forward to a big party today?"

Jacob giggled and clapped. "Balloons!"

"Well..." Mike scratched his head "...not sure about those being there, but I'll see what I can rustle up for you. I'm heading off the cottage to collect Fin. You all ready to leave for the church soon?"

"Soon," Monty replied, walking into the room, followed by Tex and Connor. In one hand he held a bottle of scotch, the other a bunch of shot glasses.

After Mike left and they'd all shared a toast, the room cleared out to give Ryan and Jacob a few minutes alone.

Setting his son down, Ryan crouched to eye level.

“Mummy’s marrying us at the party, Daddy?”

“She is.” Ryan adjusted the lapels on Jacob’s little suit jacket before looking into dark eyes so much like his own. They were wide with excitement as he smiled brightly, just like Jake used to do. “Are you ready?”

Jacob nodded vigorously.

Ryan drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Me too.”

Standing back up, he held out his hand and Jacob took hold, his tiny hand swallowed inside Ryan’s rough, scarred palm. “Let’s go.”



Fin stood outside the doors of the church—one arm was linked in her father’s, the other clutched her bouquet. Laura had disappeared inside, slowly followed by Rachael. Her turn was next.

With her heart lodged in her throat, she peered up into her father’s eyes. “Dad,” she whispered.

“Fin.” His eyes filled, pride shining so vividly on his face. “You’ll always be my little girl, you know that, right?”

“I love you.”

His lips pressed together, battling against the tide of tears. “I love you too. I’m so proud of you.” Her father exhaled audibly. “Ready?”

Fin nodded quickly and they approached the entrance of the church. She was *more* than ready. Ryan’s name was marked on her skin, the scar from having his son was worn with pride, and soon she would carry his name.

As they approached the doors of the church, her eyes fell on the sea of Army green before her—so many soldiers—Ryan’s friends and comrades, all heroes in their own right. They filled the church to capacity, forcing the memory of Jake’s funeral to slam into her until it sucked the breath from her body.

“Dad,” she gasped, her throat closing over. “I can’t ... Dad ...”

Wrenching her arm free, Fin spun around and flew down the steps of the church, blocking out the shouts that came from behind her. Lifting her lace skirt, her heeled feet flew over the soft, thick grass until she reached the side of the building. Slamming her back against the creamy, weatherboard slats, she sucked in air that somehow wouldn't reach her lungs.

Firm, warm hands gripped her biceps, and even with her eyes screwed shut she knew that touch. She would always know it.

“Ryan,” she panted, swallowing before gasping again for oxygen.

“Breathe, baby,” he ordered firmly.

“Can't,” she choked out.

“Open your eyes.”

They flew open, meeting Ryan's. His was brow furrowed in concern, and his dark eyes were somber. They'd lost some of their light since Jake died. It hadn't returned and knowing it never would made her want to curl up and sob for all they'd lost. “Jake's out there alone when he should be here and I can't breathe. I can't ...”

“Look at me, Fin. Breathe with me, okay? In...” he inhaled deeply and she tried to follow “...and out.”

After a full minute, her breathing started to steady.



Ryan's heart shredded into pieces at the agony returning to Fin's pretty eyes. “I know, Fin. I know what you saw in there. I saw it too. I see it every day, and some days are harder than others,” he admitted hoarsely, feeling a tear break free and spill down his face. Fin reached up, gently wiping it away with her thumb. “Today is the hardest of all.” Ryan slid his hands up her arms until they were cupping her face. “Jake and Cassidy will never get to feel a love like ours. They'll

never get a day like this, where they can tell the world they matter to someone the way you do to me. So let's do this for them, okay? Together."

"Together," she whispered thickly.

Leaning in, he pressed his lips to hers, his heart thumping with so much love it hurt. Pulling back, he brushed a lock of hair off her face. "Is this where I get to tell you how beautiful you look today? Because you do. You're the sun and the moon, and the stars, and the light, and all the colour. You're everything. *Everything*. I can't even ..." Fin crushed her mouth against his, her kiss wild and hard and almost desperate in intensity. He slid his tongue inside her mouth, tasting her. It was like kissing her again for the first time—bittersweet and achingly beautiful. Her pretty bouquet of daisies dropped carelessly to the ground when she reached up and twined her arms around his neck, clinging tightly to him. Groaning deeply, Ryan tore his mouth away, dragging air into his lungs as they looked into each other's eyes.

A thunderous round of applause came from behind them, and from somewhere he heard Kyle shout, "Did we miss the ceremony and skip straight to the wedding night?"

Ryan lips curved slowly until he felt a grin split his face wide open. Fin pressed her hands on his shoulders and peered over them. Pressing her lips together, her eyes filled with laughter and he turned his head, finding the entire church full of guests now standing outside, clapping and cheering wildly.

He let go of Fin and turned. Reaching blindly for her hand, he gave it a squeeze. "Fin decided she wanted an outdoor wedding," he told them all blithely. "I don't know about all of you, but I'm more than happy to oblige her."

"Bet that's not all you're happy to do to her!" Tex shouted.

Fin burst into laughter at the same time Mike pinned Tex with a murderous glare. Hearing about the things Ryan loved doing to Fin was not something a father needed to hear about his little girl.

"Enough of that, Tex," Ryan continued. Looking down at Fin by his side, he said softly, "You want to do this out here, baby?"

“Ryan.” Her eyes softened as she looked up at him. “I’d marry you anywhere. Out here, in the church, in Hell if need be, as long as I get you at the end of it.”

“You’ve already got me, baby. Don’t ever let go, okay? Don’t ...” He swallowed hard.

Reaching up, she brushed softly at the hair on his forehead. “I love you, Ryan. I won’t ever let go.”

As the sun set they stood under the dappled light of the big oak tree, Rachael and Laura on Fin’s left, and Kyle and Monty on Ryan’s right. With Jacob tucked safely in his arms, and his hand holding tight to Fin, Ryan promised to love Fin—not just in sickness and in health, but in peace and in war, and in loss and in love.

Looking up into the darkening sky, he breathed deeply and closed his eyes. *Jake. You’ve given me your family. I don’t know how to thank you. I wouldn’t have survived without them.*

Ryan’s lips curved softly when he heard Jake’s voice in his head. *Today is just another ordinary day, Kendall. The sun rises, babies are born, people die, and the sun sets. But you’re far from ordinary. You’re the son of my parents, the heart of my sister, the soul inside my nephew, and you’re my brother. Don’t thank me. You’ve given my family peace.*

Ryan opened his eyes and focused on the girl he adored. He saw her stumbling up the steps at school and remembered the feel of her soft, small hand in his. Her saw her kicking the soccer ball that sunny day when he’d realised he needed to be her everything. He remembered how she’d stood in the hallway of her cottage after his return from war, her hair and clothes in disarray and both hurt and hope filling her eyes. He saw the agony when she almost gave up on life after losing Jake, and he saw how frighteningly still and pale she’d looked in the hospital after having his son. All of it was imprinted so preciously on his heart. But now? He saw his wife and the mother of his child, and she burned so bright beside him it hurt his eyes.

❧ THE END ❧