

Rock Chick Rematch

A Rock Chick Novella

By Kristen Ashley

Teaser Chapter

Prologue *His Father*

“Don’t make me check that backpack,” I shouted to my son.

“Mom!”

I’d had sixteen years to navigate the wide spectrum of my son’s different varieties of *Mom!* and get a lock on each version.

This one said, *I don’t need my mother to check my backpack. I haven’t since I was twelve. I’m all grown up. Stop already.*

And yet, the boy was always forgetting something.

I was in the kitchen, dealing with the pork in the slow cooker.

I was doing this against my will.

Not against my will when it came to cooking. I was a damn good cook, and I did say so myself. Also, I liked doing it.

No, it was because it was summer. Summer wasn’t about slow-cooker meals. That was winter. Winter was stews and chili and enchiladas. Summer was meat on the grill and some kind of salad (preferably one with potatoes or macaroni in it, let the good Lord bless the woman—and it had to be a woman—who deemed those “salads”).

It almost hurt to put that pork shoulder in the crockpot that morning.

But I was a single mom. I worked. My kid was busy with end-of-school-year stuff (though, Liam loved to cook, just right now, with finals and friends and parties and making plans for the summer, he had less time than me).

And, I told myself, I was making barbecue pulled pork (the vinegary North Carolina style, and don't give me any guff about that goodness, I was a barbecue aficionado, and I could appreciate all the different styles, but if you were pulling pork, you went NC).

Pulled pork sandwiches were a summer thing.

Though, I wished I had a smoker. That said summer to me.

Also winter. A smoker didn't discriminate.

These were the thoughts on my mind so I didn't think of other things.

Like the weird stuff going on at work that was giving me a very bad vibe.

Or more importantly, like the chat I'd had with Lee and Eddie yesterday. About the decision I'd made. About the conversation I'd had with my son that morning. About the decision he'd made.

And about how his father was going to handle it.

(My take: he wasn't going to handle it very well.)

(My next take: my first take was an understatement.)

Liam walked into the kitchen, all tall, gangly teen.

As I watched him, I took the hit I always took once the boy started to fade out of him and he began to look like the man he'd become.

In other words, he began to look just like his father.

“You do my head in sometimes,” he grumbled.

Liam was a master grumbler. There was some backtalk, and he made an art of being a moody teen, but that was as far as it went. I'd never had any real trouble with my son. Not a day of it.

Wait, no. I referred to his terrible twos as my torrential twos. I'd never seen a more fearless, curious, intelligent child in my life. He found ways to get into everything. It was ingenious and exhausting.

(Like his father.)

Nor had I met a sweeter, more thoughtful and compassionate kid in my life.

(Also, like his father. Gah!)

“I don't need a phone call at work tomorrow, asking me to bring something into school,” I replied.

He leveled his warm, brown eyes on me. Though warm, they had a tinge of a spark.

“When’s the last time I asked you to bring something to school that I forgot?”

“Last week.”

Those eyes rolled.

“You did,” I asserted.

And he did. I’d learned part of the teenage hormonal growth cycle included not only selective hearing, but significant short-term memory issues.

“Tomorrow is the last day. I don’t have anything I need to take to school,” he reminded me.

“How about this? Next year, you do you,” I suggested. “If you pull this absent-minded professor stuff, once you’re in school, you deal.”

“If I had a car, I could come home myself and get it.”

Here we go.

It wasn’t like I didn’t have the money to buy my kid a car. I made good money. And I got an envelope every month that more than made things comfortable for us, *way* more.

(Again, his father, even though his father didn’t know I knew it was from *his father*.)

I could buy my kid a car.

And it’d help. Liam used mine, which was inconvenient.

And if he had his own car, after school, I could send him to Sonic to get me a diet cherry limeade so he could drop it by the office to help get me through the afternoon and buy a bag of Sonic ice for us to use at home because that ice was the shizzlesticks.

I just didn’t think giving a sixteen-year-old something as huge as a car just because I could was a good idea.

If this was a different world, I could talk to his father about it.

Since it was this world, I was going to talk to his father about it, I just had to wait until the man got his head out of his behind (again).

And...well, wait until we all got beyond what Liam had decided that morning, which, considering how things had been the last few years, I wasn’t sure his father was going to embrace.

“Let me think about it,” I mumbled, shifting my attention back to using the forks to pull the pork apart.

“That’s what you said the last time I mentioned it,” Liam told me. “And the time before. And the time before that. And the time—”

I looked up at him, and that *up* was far. He was tall.

Like his father.

“I’m not done thinking about it.”

Another eye roll and that did it. I was making a calendar. Countdown to the end of the teenage eye rolls.

Liam was used to my calendars. We had a countdown to the end of his comebacks of a snappy “So?”, which was a habit he got into when he was eleven and testing the boundaries of my authority. We had a countdown to the end of him dribbling his damned basketball in the house when he was thirteen. We had a countdown to the end of his annoyed “But why?” when he wanted to update his room from Transformers to Tupac when he was fourteen (no shade on Tupac, and I got it my kid going into high school didn’t want to have little boy stuff around him—it was just that he had to learn, you don’t get stuff just because you want it—though, full disclosure: his room went from Transformers to Tupac, but even though Liam didn’t know it, that was his father).

But I loved my boy, so he was getting a warning.

“I’m making a calendar about that eye roll,” I shared.

Another eye roll.

I nearly started laughing.

I didn’t only because he teased, “Absent-minded professor? You’re such a goof.”

“What?” I asked. “You’re going to be a professor.”

He leaned against the island in a casual way that had one effect on high school girls, that effect something I refused to think about, and another effect on his mother. This effect pushing me to think about those high school girls and how I once was one and I caught the eye of a certain handsome, popular boy who had command of his body at a young age, a kind smile, a great sense of humor, and an amazing streak of loyalty, which ended up with me being Liam’s momma.

“I’m going to be a lawyer, then a senator,” Liam stated.

I tried not to quell my son’s ambitions. In fact, the opposite.

But I was a paralegal. Before that, I was a court reporter. I had a lot of experience with the legal system. And I didn't keep a database or anything, but off the cuff, I felt I could say with a good deal of authority that five-sixths of attorneys were pure a-holes.

I didn't want my son to become an a-hole.

I opened my mouth to share (again) he could *teach* law, this being a prelude to rehashing our conversation from that morning to make sure the decision he'd made was one he wanted to move forward on, when the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Liam said, moving that way.

I tamped down my fear of my son opening the front door. He was tall and athletic. He was sixteen, not six. It wasn't like our doorbell rang fifty times a day, but this also was far from the first time he'd answered it. And we lived in a nice neighborhood.

Even so, he would always be a little boy to me. It was my lot as a mother, the worry, the drive to protect, even though now, my son thought that last part was his job.

And this was the problem. Liam was a little boy to me, but he was something else in reality, and he needed me to trust him to find his way with that.

Ugh.

I needed to buy him a car.

I put the forks on a spoon rest and was about to put the top back on the slow cooker so the meat could cook in its juices and barbecue sauce for a while when I heard Liam's tentative, "Mom."

I looked up.

And I saw the man standing with him. Bushy gray beard, long gray hair pulled back in a braid, rolled bandana around his forehead, black leather vest over a long-sleeved Harley tee and jeans.

Duke.

I hadn't seen Duke in...

"Honey." His gravelly voice rolled my way, that one word making fear grab hold of the entire length of my spine. "It's Darius."

The tone of his voice, the look on his face, the earth fell from under my feet.

Because Darius was my son's father.

And he was the love of my life.
But my boy had never met him.

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