



**Season of  
Retribution**

**Rock Hollow Series,  
Book 1**

**Shanna Nichols**

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## **Season of Retribution**

**Shanna Nichols**

For Mike, J, and MaRita... my rock, my guidance, and my  
test subjects. For Poppy, thank you for showing me life.

## Chapter One

“Alright stop! There is nothing here for anybody to find,” Lilly heard Drew saying on the other side of his office door.

“Look, I told you there’s nothing here. They would have found it when they were crawling all over the place if there were.” Drew paused. “Fine. You’re right, I know. I was stupid and careless once, only once. It won’t happen again.” There was another silence, then Drew erupted in laughter, “Yeah, she’s having *memories*. Look, I’ve got it under control. Don’t worry about her. She’s never been anything. She doesn’t know anything—” Lilly heard the wheels holding a drawer in the tracks of his desk roll, and the drawer clapped closed.

She barged into the office and threw the watch she was bringing from the repair shop onto his desk. The bright copper penny rattled in the center and Lilly thought of the quip he said so often, “*Penny for your thoughts*.” How clever. The shrink offers a penny for your thoughts. Every time she heard him say the words it ignited a deep rage that would climb close to the top but never quite boil over. Lilly didn’t understand why she hated hearing him say those words. She’d heard far worse from him every day that elicited no reaction.

The small woman who sat at the reception desk was the only person in the building to have even noticed her, aside from Drew. The snarky Mrs. Ehrin watched as Lilly exited the elevator. The condescending smile she gave

Lilly every time she saw her began to etch onto her lips. Lilly was having none of it.

“Have a wonderf—” she began.

“Oh, shut up,” Lilly snapped, and slammed her palms into the exit door. The hag needed to let go years ago, she thought. Dr. Ehrin passed away just after Drew had taken over the operation of the clinic. The wife, on the other hand, would never give up the ghost.

*Secure, huh?* Lilly thought as she looked around her husband’s office on the first floor of their home. She started going through everything she could think he would store information on. The only thing in the room was his computer, three banker’s boxes full of patient files he had hidden from auditors during the Medicaid fraud investigation that was only a few months old, and a file cabinet. The file cabinet was only a piece of furniture. There was nothing in it except the green hanging files it came with. Paperwork had never been Drew’s thing. Pride, condescension, humiliation, that was more Drew’s thing. He was cocky, he was ruthless, and he was mean. A combination none of his colleagues or peers would ever see.

He looked the part of the good doctor with his deep brown eyes that, to some, may have been comforting; to Lilly they carried a silent warning. He kept his raven hair cut into a military high and tight that was refreshed on the fifth of every month, no exceptions. He displayed his tall, trim physique in five hundred dollar suits that Lilly had to ensure were laundered and pressed to perfection with creases he measured to the centimeter every week; then hung in the closet in order of darkest to lightest. The product of all that was the Drew everyone else saw. Lilly was certain he saved the real Drew, the hellion, just for her.

The computer was the only place he could hide something, and the only place she couldn’t check. Drew had spent countless hours working on security to keep all

eyes besides his own from viewing the contents. Cheap bastard wouldn't spend a penny hiring someone that knew what they were doing.

He caught her on his computer. That was why he hit her. She heard the door knob turn and the creak of the hinges as he came in. She knew, right that moment, she was his prey. Her fingers stopped pecking at the keys and she slid the chair back, but it was no use. He stood in the doorway glaring at her. Her cheeks were burning as his legs started toward her. The carpet crunched beneath his weight. Her heart pounded in her chest and rose to her throat as her hands began to tremble. Words were a distant memory as he closed the gap between them.

She closed her eyes and tried to find words or an excuse that would explain her being in this room, in this chair. When she opened her eyes he was looming over her, his shadow seeming to block all light. She struggled to breathe as her heart raced. His eyes bore into her, wild, like an animal about to pounce. When he opened his mouth, his voice came out even and measured, but she knew better. His tone was scarcely above a whisper, yet the words he spat at her held enough vituperation to have choked her.

"Listen young lady," he hissed in the slow measured tone that indicated he was about to make her feel as small and senseless as he thought her to be. She clenched her eyes shut and wrapped her fingers around the padded leather arms of the chair. He knew those three words summoned Lilly's ghosts. He knew saying them to her was the best way to spark a volatile reaction. He knew those were the words used by her high school algebra teacher when he was making her earn grades in ways that had more to do with the bible than math. Drew knew. Drew had never given a damn, and wasn't starting then either.

He wanted to provoke her, to command her, and to dominate her. The tiny vein that inched its way up his forehead bulged out as he said the words. It made him look

like he had a small, blue crack forming and his head may burst at any moment. It didn't usually appear until well into the fight. For only the second time in nine years, Lilly was scared. Scared of Drew, scared of what he was about to do, scared that she may not have a tomorrow to get away from him.

He mocked her. He frowned like a baby and pretended to cry as though she were doing that in front of him. He stumbled for words in a mimicking voice.

"Stop it, Drew. You're gonna make me remember what a whore I've been since I was a kid," he said in a child-like playground taunt. "You know I'm just dressed up trash, Drew." Lilly's hands were shaking, and her legs felt like wet noodles as rage boiled bile up into her throat. She jumped from the oversized chair, sending it careening in his direction, and tried to scramble toward the door.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" he roared, grabbing her by the arm. "Prying little bitches don't get to run away when they get caught." She turned toward him, her body shaking, and held to the desk behind her to steady herself.

"I am your *wife*," she screeched, "I shouldn't have to pry."

His eyes were wild, maniacal. His laugh sounded throaty and deep. She screamed the loudest high-pitched noise her small frame could muster, fearing he'd snap any second. The housekeeper had left hours before, and the closest neighbor was at least a half block away. No one was close enough to hear her. No one cared enough to help her. Drew stopped laughing and stared directly into Lilly's eyes, taking small, slow steps toward her from less than a foot away, keeping a thin smile painted on his face. He overshadowed her, being a foot taller and at least eighty pounds heavier. Lilly backed herself against the desk until it dug into her skin. She clenched her teeth and held firmly to the corner, trying to make the desk swallow her.

“You stupid little bitch,” Drew said as his fist came hurtling toward her. The explosion in her mouth happened as tiny blasts in her head lit the insides of her eyelids like a firework show. Her head snapped backwards and collided with the computer monitor. Before she could piece together what was happening, his other fist landed in her jaw.

She spat blood at him and landed a kick as hard as her runner’s legs could into his groin. He made a gurgling sound as he doubled himself and reached for the armchair. Lilly slid from between him and the computer desk and ran up the stairs, locking the doors behind her. She grabbed her worn duffle that had held every belonging she owned since she left home from the closet, and began to shove anything she could grab into it.

This time, she had to get away for good. *No chickening out now*, she thought as the metallic taste of blood in her mouth made her gag and her chest burn with hatred.

She worked as quickly as her heart raced, forcing clothes into the duffle. She heard Drew slamming doors on the floor below, and finally the front door rattled windows as he yanked it closed. She watched out the window until his car was a tiny speck, turned her pillow over and slid her hand into the case to retrieve the thin silver chain with the crimson vial, placing it around her neck. She took one last glance out the window to see Drew’s car was still gone, hoisted the duffle over her shoulder, and walked out the front door.

She drove for hours with the radio on, but the only thing Lilly heard since leaving the driveway of her lavishly furnished, acutely manicured, perfect hell was her mother’s voice telling her, “One day you’ll wake up and see what an ass that husband of yours really is.”

Of course, as always, Momma had been right, though she would never hear it from Lilly’s lips. There was no way Momma could know just what Drew really was,

nobody did. Nor would anyone have believed it if anyone told them. Momma, though, she saw right through him the day she met him.

“He’s got a slick smile and drifter’s eyes. Don’t you turn your back on him, girl. He’s a snake,” Momma told Lilly after Drew off-handedly compared Rock Hollow to a Saturday night variety show. The muscles in his arm had tightened around Lilly’s waist as the words tore through him. Momma never minced words, and she never held back. If she thought it, rest assured she would say it. That filter had broken years ago.

Drew could not get away fast enough. He shoved Lilly, nearly toppling her into the car, smirked back at Momma who was standing in the doorway, and held a peace symbol with his first two fingers. Not that he particularly cared about any sort of peace movement.

He stewed the entire drive and decided Lilly needed what he called ‘limited contact,’ aka zero contact, with her family. It was in her best interest, in his opinion. Everything about their lives was his opinion, his thought, his way. To be fair, his was a well-regarded opinion among the people who mattered—to him.

Maybe that bastard was right. Maybe she was just nuts. Hadn’t he told her a thousand times? Or, maybe Drew took away everything that ever meant a damn thing, and she had nothing left to lose. Whichever the case, hell was in the rearview.

Her hair was blowing in all directions as she fumbled through the car for a pair of sunglasses. The asphalt looked like water as the heat drenched it. Drew would never have allowed her to keep the window down. “*You* may have been born trash, but you’re not going to make me look like I went slumming,” he said, more than once.

The familiar tune bellowed from the radio and Lilly caught herself twirling the crimson vial on her necklace

between her fingers; *Leather and Lace*, by Stevie Nicks and Don Henley. Thoughts of Brad flooded her mind, as they often did. This was their song. She could see him clearly, in her mind's eye, as he was the night she'd met him.

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“I wrecked my Harley,” he said, taking the seat next to her at The Sunken Ship, a bar Bea Drake owned just outside of the county line.

“How’s the bike?” she asked after looking him over and seeing no scrapes or cuts. He smiled at Lilly, a crooked devil-may-care grin, chipping away at some of the ice she’d encased her heart in. Something twinkled in his big gorgeous cerulean eyes. He looked at her with a blank stare that, to someone else, might have made him appear daft, but she could see the savvy, refined man that lurked beneath. He did not mask himself, yet he was not laying all of his cards on the table.

“Two beers please,” he said to Bea with a confidence Lilly had only heard in movies. Real people could not possibly be as sure of themselves. Bea knew Lilly was not old enough to be there, much less drinking, but when no one else was in the bar, she could have cared less what Lilly did.

Bea looked from Brad to Lilly and finally shrugged and handed him two long-necks, uncapping them as they passed over the bare wood of the bar. Bea was suspicious of most customers that came in, especially the ones that were not ‘regulars.’ This new guy was no exception. She kept her beady, bronze eyes on him as he offered Lilly the bottle he’d bought her. “Dance with me?” he only half asked as he stood behind her offering his hand.

She looked at the dusty bar floor where only a single row of tables separated the long bar and the door, no dance space. There was an old jukebox in the corner Lilly

assumed came with the ancient building, and was not sure it even worked.

“What? Here?” she asked. “You’re nuts!”

After a quick assessment of the room, he sat his beer on the bar and began to pull tables together, the legs scraping against the wooden planked floor, creating a space big enough for them to dance. He moved with an air of class and refinement, a sort of sophistication she had never encountered. When he walked, there was an ever so slight twitch in his step Lilly thought emanated grace. Even the way he held his bottle, between his two first fingers and thumb, oozed finesse. Yet, he was in *The Sunken Ship*, moving old furniture that had seen its heyday come and go, just to share a dance with her.

He made his way to the old jukebox and inserted a couple of ones after he finished his rearrangement. Lilly watched him entranced. She couldn’t hide her intrigue with him, or what music he might request. She knew nothing about him, aside from how captivated she was, yet there was a familiarity as if she’d known him for years. As he strode back over to her with a swagger that kept time with her heart, she heard the music begin.

Brad approached her and offered her his hand a second time, “Now?”

She laughed and shook her head.

“Don’t tell me I did all of that and you’re just gonna say no again,” he smiled, and when he did his eyes danced to their own beat, the same one her heart was pounding out. She could see she posed a challenge to him, and he rose to meet it valiantly.

She took his hand cautiously, trying to display enough distrust to ward off any bad omens he may be carrying, and allowed him to lead her to the spot he had just cleared, where they swayed with the tune. His face at her ear, she heard him attempt to sing along, which stayed with the tune but the words came out as, “Aww Ooo” over and

over. Everything about him made her heart speed up. Electric tingles raced through her chest as she let him put his arms around her waist. She laid her head on his shoulder and inhaled his windswept and mild woody cologne scent; it made her dizzy. Desire and curiosity inched her closer to him. He tightened his arms on her back, and she felt his heartbeat through his shirt.

He requested no other songs, and that one played three more times. They swayed back and forth with it each time.

“Thank you, my lady,” he said, bowing to her after the song ended for the fourth time. She smiled at him, and stared into his eyes, trying to figure him out.

“You should do that more. You’re stunning when you smile.” He took one last long pull from his bottle and made a wide sweeping motion toward the door.

Once in the parking lot she saw the Harley he claimed earlier to have been wrecked. “Don’t look wrecked to me,” Lilly said, hooking her thumb toward the bike.

“I didn’t say I totaled it. I laid it down a few weeks ago,” he said, shrugging. “Got your attention didn’t it?”

Laughter boiled from deep in her stomach and burst forth despite her best effort to staunch it. This man was something wild.

“Are you the one my momma always warned me about?” she asked him amused.

“Depends. What were the warnings?” he said as he lifted both shoulders, and watched one booted foot kick at gravel as the moon cast a long shadow beside them.

His energy and passion radiated as they walked together. It lit up the air around him and drew her to him like a magnet. His presence sent chills down her spine. As she laughed, his hands cupped both of her arms. When she looked up at him, his lips pressed hard against hers. She was shocked and started to pull away, but the tingle in her

chest had grown stronger and spread like a warm blanket. The tiny voices in her head warned her this was a bad idea, this was the start of something she would never be free of again, but the smallest, most uninhabitable part of her heart made her kiss him back.

“That wasn’t so bad, huh?” he said when he finally pulled away. He touched her lips lightly with his finger, gnarling the butterfly wings that flapped in her chest, and mounted his Harley. “I’ll be here tomorrow night, can I see you then?” he asked.

“Maybe, if you play your cards right,” Lilly answered playfully.

“Oh, I can play some cards,” he winked as the old bike rumbled to life. She felt the vibration in her stomach and noticed that her knees were wobbling as she leaned against her car.

“What the hell just happened?” she asked aloud as she watched a cloud of dust rise from the gravel parking lot. She watched the red glow of his single tail light until it disappeared on the highway. She glanced through the window at Bea, who pretended to wipe the bar down with her eyes glued to the scene outside, and climbed into her beaten down 77 Nova her brother had warned her against driving.

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Her heart fluttered, even now, all these years later, as she fumbled for her purse in the bucket seat of her Audi, and remembered the first time she’d laid eyes on him, the night she’d lost her heart.

“Crazy ass man,” she laughed as she tucked the tiny vial that contained a bit of Brad’s ashes into her shirt before she realized she no longer had to hide it. Pain jabbed at her busted lip and swollen cheek, sending her a not so subtle reminder of the urgency to put miles between her and the scripted, controlled, and now violent life she had lived.

## Chapter Two

The text came from Lilly early in the morning, before he'd even had a coffee, which was a feat in itself. Ty wasn't sure why she would have even been out of bed at such an hour. The well-to-dos usually sleep until noon, he thought.

"I'll be home tonight. Meet me at the house," she had written. No explanation. The text jolted Ty through his usual morning routine, and he opted to take his coffee and head into the station rather than on the porch swing. As his old black Ford rattled to life in the driveway, he couldn't shake the knot that was tightening in his chest. Eight months earlier he'd received a call that had brought Lilly back into his life. She'd called in the middle of a double shift on a Sunday afternoon, asking him to drive three hours to meet her for lunch.

He heard the underlying panic in her voice, though it would have gone unnoticed by anyone else. Having a mother that doted over the novelty of her children, Ty had heard all of the stories and research of twin telepathy and could attest that it held at least some truth.

Two lanes of asphalt wound down the hillside as Ty replayed the entire lunch in his mind. He couldn't help but think of how much life had been lived in the years since Lilly left, and Ty missed his sister sorely. He never quite let go of the nagging thought that he had driven her away. Lilly and Momma were never able to get on solid footing after the Ricky Drake thing, and Ty stayed locked in his own hell, unable to quell the battles that raged between them.

Lilly, once a smart ass, foul-mouthed fireball that would just as soon tell you where on her body you could plant your lips as she was to look at you, sounded almost conservative on the phone. She didn't sound like the person he grew up with at all. She was distant, like she was hurrying to get off of the phone, but asking about everyone and everything at home. She sounded distracted, which he attributed to the bastard she'd married.

Ty, as the only York to have ever abided by the law, much less gone into a career enforcing it, had been working the only murder in Rock Hollow, Kentucky in over fifty years. It had happened three weeks to the day after he was elected sheriff. Two seventeen year old boys had gone to The Hollow, a cleared spot at the top of Rock Hollow Hill where the local kids go for their rite of passage, hanging out on weekends, loud music, and alcohol when they could get someone to buy it for them. The two boys never returned.

Every moment of his life since that early morning had been sacrificed to solving the murder. Even Tara, who had grown up in a house of police officers, had given up on him and left. Since Lilly's call, Ty had the distraction that he desperately needed. He could put his energies into piecing his family back together, whatever that looked like.

The winding hill gave way to the valley where tiny housetops poked above the fog. A tractor ran alongside the fence beside the highway as an old farm hand in his overhauls threw his hand up without ever glancing to see who he waved to. Ty rarely waved back, no one ever noticed.

One left turn and two miles later, Ty pulled into the parking spot reserved for him. Ben Hale, Ty's best friend since they attended the police academy together, was already in the office. His large frame, dark brutish features, and nearly eidetic memory intimidated some, but the guy

had a heart of gold. Ty thought of him as the brother he never had.

“What’s got the FBI in Rock Hollow before dawn?” Ty teased Ben as he walked between the rows of desks on his way to the coffee pot.

“Same thing that brings the sheriff in before dawn every day,” Ben answered.

“You’re looking into cold cases, too, are ya?”

“It’s the FBI. We are always looking into cold cases.”

Ty scooped the dark grounds into the filter and inhaled the bitter aroma, allowing its robust scent to jar his senses into action. He looked at the text from Lilly again as he waited for the brew to end.

“If you weren’t so damn cheap you could have one of those single serve things in here. They’re quicker,” Ben announced without looking away from the computer.

“Mhm,” Ty grunted.

“What’s up?” Ben asked, finally looking at Ty.

“My sister.”

“What about her?” Ben rose and dodged between empty desk chairs to look at Ty’s phone. “So, she’s on her way here?” he asked.

“Yeah. I wish I could figure out what’s going on with her.”

“Are you still talking about that lunch thing you two did a while back?” Ben mused.

The coffee pot gave an exasperated puff and Ty poured himself a cup. He would have to take it black; no one ever replaced the cream and sugar. Ty and Ben walked into Ty’s office as steam rose from the Styrofoam cup, heating his palm.

“She was so different. I mean, sure everybody grows up and all, but it was more than that. She was almost hollow. She didn’t even look like Lilly.”

“Have you done any more follow up on the drug company?” Ben asked.

Ty shook his head. He hadn't thought about the drug company since the day of their lunch, when he'd followed Lilly without her knowledge. She went into a building to see what Ty presumed was a psychic, and he made his way to the clinic Drew operated. He collected the brochure for Sounds of Hope psychiatric clinic from the top drawer of his desk where he kept his 'follow up later' stuff. Ty winced at how full the drawer was getting.

He remembered the massive five-story building with its rolling green hill and glass façade. It looked like a country club instead of a medical facility.

He had hoped to find that everything was normal, though, in truth, he had no idea what 'abnormal' may look like at a psychiatric facility.

“I picked this up a couple of months ago when I dropped Momma off at the hospital,” Ty said tossing the brochure across his desk in front of Ben, who had taken the seat opposite him.

“What is it?” Ben asked, turning the colorful glossy pamphlet in his hands. “Sounds of Hope? Psyche place?”

“Yeah. Lilly's husband runs it,” Ty said, pecking at the keys of his ancient computer.

“Andrew Wilt is your brother in law?”

Ty nodded, sucking on his bottom lip. The screen in front of him was just beginning to illuminate.

“What was that drug company again?” Ben asked.

“Glick. The guy driving the box truck nearly branded it into my forehead, remember?”

Ben nodded. “They must be a big contributor to the clinic, this was printed by Glick,” he said handing the brochure to Ty, thumb on the script at the bottom center. “What was weird about it again?”

“Besides me nearly becoming the new hood ornament for the truck? I'm not sure, really. Two guys,

dressed like delivery men, got out and rang the bell by the back door. A tiny lady that I later found out was the receptionist opened the back door, and one guy pushed in a hand truck with several large red crates, the other one who had the name 'Ian' embroidered on his shirt waited for Drew and another lady. When they came out the conversation looked intense. The lady stood there with her hands on her hips and her mouth pinched tight and Drew was pointing this way and that way. I heard the guy, Ian, say that 'Loose has more.'"

"Loose? Is that the name of a person?"

"I don't know. I don't know what they, or it, or he, or whatever has more of either. The guy said that he was going back to Memphis. Not sure what's in Memphis either. I have looked and can't find an office or warehouse in Memphis for Glick."

"Maybe it's not Glick you're looking for. Did you look for any other pharma in the area?"

"No. I don't even know what I would be looking for," he said, glancing at Ben who was consumed in the pamphlet for the clinic. "I don't know, something just wasn't right about the way Lilly acted, ya know? Before she left the only thing she talked about was getting out of this hellhole town and never looking back. It wasn't *home*. But, that day, she referred to it that way several times. She'd stare off in the distance, then snap back, then do it again. I thought she was gonna cry once."

Ty was staring at his computer screen as he spoke. He had opened his email and saw that he had received a few reports from his deputy, Kari Spear.

"So why's she coming home?" Ben asked, breaking the silence that had grown thick.

"She didn't say, just said she was coming," Ty shrugged. "I keep thinking about Drew and that lady he was with at the back door. After the whole thing with the drug delivery, they walked out front, close to where I was

parked. It looked like she was chewing him a new backside. I don't know, like she was his mom or something. But, she got into a car with Ohio official plates on it. Maybe she was an inspector or something."

"Doubt it. Inspectors don't really take part in deliveries of medications, and they do their backside ripping in a written report, not the parking lot," Ben said. "Did you say Ohio plates?"

Ty nodded.

"Hey boss, did you get my reports?" Kari Spear, Ty's second in command, poked her head in the door, auburn curls springing from her ponytail. Dark crescents under her eyes suggested she had worked all night.

"Sure did. I haven't read them yet, but they are in my email."

"Ok, I wanted to make sure. We've got an empty house."

Ben cocked his eyebrow at Ty.

"Everyone has been released, all cells are empty," Ty told him. Ben nodded.

"Sorry. I guess that sounded weird," Kari said, tucking her head, hiding the heat rising to her pale cheeks.

"It's ok. We're the same kind of weird, Spear. I'll go over the reports in a little bit."

Kari turned and walked to her desk without glancing back into the room. She was a smart, tough cop. At only five foot four, she could, and had, taken down everything from the 'good old boys' that got too rowdy, to the hardcore, violent offenders.

"So, the clinic is in Kentucky, yes?" Ben asked. Ty nodded. "Then that would not have been an inspector with Ohio plates."

"Probably not. I don't know, man, but something is off there."

"I do not know, my friend, but it's probably nothing," Ben said sliding the pamphlet across Ty's desk as

he stood. “I’ve gotta get back to it. It’s still cool if I crash at your house for a while right?”

“Oh, yeah. I meant to ask if you were still doing that.”

“Ok, cool. I’ll be a little late tonight, I still have to finalize a few things at my old office,” Ben said standing in the doorway.

Ty could not get Lilly out of his head. She had looked so different. Even her hair, which was once a thick mane of honey blonde waves, was dyed platinum and straightened. Her perfectly circular golden eyes were barely visible under fake eyelashes and make-up she had never needed.

He thought of how easily Lilly lashed out when he told her about his ex-fiancé, as though time and distance had never separated them. Ty knew, somehow, Lilly had been trying to tell him something that day. Call it his ‘twin-sense’ or whatever, but the knot in his chest, now working toward his stomach, told him that Lilly needed him now more than ever.