

# Hippie Chick Reunion

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## PROLOGUE

*Windham, New Jersey, 1955*

The instant Lorna Bono turned off the ignition she felt nauseous. She ruled out morning sickness since she was already six months pregnant with her second child. It couldn't have been anything she'd eaten because her diet was the same every day—cold cereal and bologna sandwiches. It wasn't the heat, even though the daytime temperature had been in the nineties all week. No, she told herself, the queasiness in her stomach was probably stage fright. The feeling an actor gets on opening night—the body's way of telling the mind that it's terrified.

"Kaye, let's go," she called to her three-year-old daughter, who sat in the backseat combing her doll's hair. Despite her mother's tone, the little girl continued playing with her doll, talking to her quietly as if trying to soothe her.

"Do what I say and now!"

The child pursed her lips and flashed a pink sliver of tongue.

"How dare you!" Lorna Bono leaned into the backseat of her rusted-out Rambler, squeezed the defenseless toddler's cheeks between her fingers, and shook her head from side to side. "Don't make me hit you!" she barked. She felt a twinge of guilt for being so horrible to her firstborn, but it was overshadowed by the intimidation she felt regarding the task at hand.

Lorna jerked her daughter out of the car and swept the wriggling urchin through the air. The precocious toddler had been acting up all day, every day for months. And on the one day that Lorna needed for her to be a model

child, Kaye had gone from difficult to obstinate to completely unmanageable. Lorna kicked the door closed with the back of her heel and winced as the hinge made its usual high-pitched creaking sound.

“Hold my hand.” The twenty-three-year-old mother, still more child than adult, forced the girl’s bare feet onto the ground as if she were planting a tree, and tightly gripped her tiny fingers.

“You hurtin’ me, Mommy.” Tears rolled down Kaye’s plump cheeks as she began to wail.

“Stop being a baby!” Lorna’s face twisted in frustration. “Babies don’t get to be with their daddies. You wanna be with your daddy?” The youngster wiped her cheek and nodded.

“Remember what I told you,” Lorna ordered, referring to the hours of rehearsal she had spent with her daughter in preparation for this moment. “Tell the bad lady that you need your daddy back.”

Kaye slipped her mother’s grasp and bolted down the walk in the center of the perfectly manicured lawn. Lorna Bono pressed a hand to her brow and screamed in her head, God help me, I’m gonna kill her.

“I’ll give you a paddling you’ll never forget,” she hissed as she darted after her. “You hear me?” Tugging the ruffled bodice of her daughter’s freshly starched pinafore, Lorna spun the miniature escape artist around to face her. “Be a good girl and stay put.” She shook Kaye by the shoulders and repeated the futile demand, mostly for self-satisfaction, knowing her headstrong daughter was indifferent to orders and immune to spankings.

Lorna pulled a crumpled scrap from the pocket of her maternity pants, even though she was sure she was in the right place. She felt her heart surge as she read the information on the paper for the hundredth time: Delores Hackbarth, 18 Longview Way, Windham, New Jersey. In threatening whispers and vengeful screams, Lorna had cursed the faceless enemy hourly, every day for months. Damn you, Delores Hackbarth. How dare you ruin my life? What do you have that I don’t have? But inexorably, as she cried into the depth of her pillow—her mother Rena’s voice echoed back... “Lorna Jean Maria Oliveri, you’re a disgrace. How in hell did you get yourself into this mess?” And then, the words she dreaded, “I was right about you.”

Lorna let out a long breath and gulped hard. She had never imagined her life would look like this, but evidently her mother had seen it coming. A first-generation Italian-American with eyes in the back of her head and a right jab that rivaled Dempsey’s, Rena Oliveri knew about survival. When her husband was found dead in a motel after a five-day drinking binge, she was left to support two small children on the wages from her waitress job.

In contrast to Lorna’s older brother Reno, her mother’s beloved namesake who could do no wrong, Lorna was considered a cross to bear by Rena,

and she accepted her mother's distaste as a different, but not less valuable, kind of love. When Lorna was barely three, her mother dubbed her "the little squaldrina," a name which Lorna proudly bestowed upon her favorite doll, softly repeating the melodic words as she cradled the toy and sang it to sleep. Much later, she learned from her Aunt Josephine that *squaldrina* was an old-world term for a strumpet. After finding the Webster's definition of strumpet, Lorna rationalized that her mother had really been telling her that she was beautiful. After all, only a pretty woman could seduce a man in that way.

Upon meeting her daughter's fiancé in 1951, Rena declared Bill Bono a *faccia di merda*, which Lorna knew from her mother's accompanying hand motion, was not to be confused with a seal of approval. Rena attended the wedding, and Lorna had been so proud that her mother had walked her down the aisle. Until she opened her gift: a hundred-dollar savings bond and a note that said, "For bail—you're going to need it."

Lorna's heart fell at the sight of her own daughter—skipping side to side down the walk, cupping her hands with a little clacking sound as she tried to scoop up a pale yellow butterfly in flight. Swallowing her pride was something she had become accustomed to being married to Bill Bono. And for the promise of a better life for Kaye than Lorna's parents had given her, she was willing to do it again.

She had only seen Delores once—the day her husband Bill had flown in and out of their aluminum-sided trailer after a week on the lam, breathless, almost maniacal with the news that he had fallen in love with a thirty-five-year-old widow. The home wrecker lay in wait, hunched down in the passenger seat of her robin's-egg blue T-Bird, while Bill delivered his carefully rehearsed getaway speech. Her husband's ten-minute soliloquy boiled down to the sole fact that everything about Lorna bugged him. The way she smelled, the cheap way she dressed, and how she flirted with other men. "And since Kaye was born," Bill complained, "you've been a lunatic, gloomy one minute and giddy the next... a real Jekyll and Hyde."

He hadn't even stopped to kiss his napping daughter good-bye as he walked out the door, his parting words the final slap. "I'm really sorry, Lorna. If I don't do this now, I'll be trapped for the rest of my life."

How dare he call me a lunatic? Lorna simmered as the image of her husband's departure resurfaced in her mind. She had relived the stinging memory a thousand times. His eyes avoiding her tear-shocked face, the backs of their heads bobbing merrily up and down, the shiny convertible as it kicked up dirt and sped off into the distance. For a while, Lorna had floated in a stupor, telling herself that Bill was trying to make her jealous, thinking that maybe it was a punishment for her own indiscretion—even imagining that

her husband had been possessed by demons and would return to her once the spell was broken.

But when he hadn't shown up after three weeks, Lorna arranged for her brother Reno, a rookie cop, to unearth the grisly evidence of her husband's matrimonial crimes. Proof of an on-the-job meeting between the two at Newark General Hospital was easy to come by. Coworkers enthusiastically relayed details of Bill's chance meeting with Delores while she was an outpatient in for some routine tests.

The handsome medical assistant had assuaged her panic over needles, soothed her faintness at the sight of blood—gestures for which the wealthy widow eagerly displayed her gratitude. Reno pieced together the particulars of their first date at the Meadowbrook Lounge—the high martini count—the cheek-to-cheek dancing to the sound of the Jimmy Dorsey band—the bodies pressed even closer together in the backseat of her car in the parking lot after closing time. Reno spared Lorna no detail of Bill's upwardly mobile stumble into Delores's world—a world he'd never even dreamed of, much less experienced.

Now, three months later, the shock had worn off, anger had given way to desperation, her pregnancy was showing, and two children needed a father—even if all he did was bring home a paycheck. Lorna glanced up at the fancy, brick-front Georgian colonial, rechecked the address on the paper against the number on the mailbox, and stuffed it back into her pocket. She looked down at Kaye. The calm look on the child's face told Lorna that for the first time in weeks, her daughter appeared willing, almost eager, to do as she'd been told.

The August air whirred with the gentle ticking of locusts on the elegant, tree-lined lane. Like a picture book life, Lorna told herself, and quickly added, that he'll be living over my rotting corpse. Taking a deep breath, Lorna Bono forced her body, weak from sobbing and jittery from sleep deprivation, across the bright green lawn and up the winding path to the formal entry. She opened the screen, pounded the brass knocker four times, stood back, and waited.

The door was opened by a slender, long-legged woman with a girlish body. Delores wore her thin blond hair in a pageboy that framed a plain, expressionless face. A simple silver cross was her only adornment. Looking at her, Lorna was confused, almost embarrassed. In contrast to her own dark, flowing hair, coal-rimmed doe eyes, and knockout curves, it made no sense. How could Bill Bono fall for this plain brown wrapper when he had her?

"Can I help you?" The soft voice lacked emotion. Echoes of the crowd cheering another Mickey Mantle home run reverberated off the imported tile in the foyer.

“You’ve already helped yourself to my husband”—Lorna patted Kaye’s head with one hand and rubbed her round belly with the other—“and his children need him back.” She was angry with herself that her voice quivered, but she tilted her chin up and continued. “I’d wager husband-stealers aren’t very well-liked in these parts. I’m sure your neighbors would be very interested to know how you snuck in like a thief in the night and charmed my husband right out of his house.”

“You live in a trailer,” Delores Hackbarth stated in a matter-of-fact tone. The faintest hint of a smirk tugged at her upper lip, “I’d hardly call that a house.”

“It may not be a house to you, living here in your mansion. But it’s a home.” Lorna unconsciously squeezed Kaye’s shoulder. “At least it was until you showed up. Now I can barely pay my bills, and she has no father.”

“I’m sorry, b-b-but...” Delores searched for words without success. For a brief moment, she considered slamming the door, but decided that would cause the very scene she wanted to avoid. It was obvious that Lorna’s routine was well-rehearsed, deliberately timed, and included the potential for police intervention—something Delores could ill afford.

Several of the neighborhood wives, who had already petitioned their friends not to include Delores at cocktail and dinner parties, had dubbed her a pariah. To make matters worse, a few of the women had inquired about Bill, causing a buzz about her immoral cohabitation with the handsome young “widowed doctor.” The blatant lie had been invented on the spot lest she be mortified by their discovery that her catch was a married, two-dollar-an-hour nursing intern.

It wasn’t as if the possibility of Lorna’s showing up hadn’t crossed her mind, but she’d pushed it away—preferring to remain wrapped in her newly-found cocoon. The passion of having a man to talk to, cook for, and keep her warm at night had eclipsed the fact that he’d left another life behind. His real life, a voice inside her whispered.

Kaye swatted at Lorna’s hand, took a step inside the house, and stared up at Delores with enormous brown eyes. “He’ll leave you, too.” The two women gasped in unison.

“Men can’t help it,” Kaye continued, in an eerily mature voice. “They want what they can’t have.”

The widow stood in stunned silence.

“Right, Mommy?” Kaye kicked her mother’s shoe as if to give her a cue.

“Right, honey.” Lorna wiggled her left hand and the quarter-carat, slightly imperfect stone in Delores’ face. “Your daddy sure knows how to have a good time with the ladies. But he’s married to me—and when he’s had his fill, he always comes home.”

The widow blinked and shook her head a few times as her eyes focused more carefully on Lorna Bono. So this is Bill's wife, Lorna, she thought. My God, she is so young. Bill had told her that his wife was twenty-three, but even so, Delores wasn't prepared for this. The girl looked to be barely out of her teens. Even pregnant, she had a remarkable figure, firm bosom, slender waist and muscular, dancer's calves.

The dark makeup that lined her wide brown eyes would have been perfect for a streetwalker or a showgirl, but it couldn't hide the puffy circles beneath them. Her clean and pressed maternity set was so outdated that it had likely been obtained second- or third hand when she had been pregnant with her daughter. Looking at the ground, she struggled to avoid the sight of the chipped orange toenail polish and imitation leather sandals. Standing next to Lorna, Delores felt a dark and unusual sensation, as if she had suddenly been soiled and disgraced by an infusion of poverty through osmosis.

And his daughter, Kaye? Delores shuddered as she was struck by the unnerving intensity of the unruly imp. She'd never seen a child her age who spoke as if she were a fully grown adult. And her complexion was odd. What was the iridescent glow that radiated from her delicate young skin? Delores reestablished eye contact with little Kaye for a brief instant and recoiled. Her lips weren't moving but Delores swore that she heard the little girl's voice say, "Do the right thing, or I'll haunt you for the rest of your life."

Delores felt the heat of the afternoon bearing down on her and thought she saw the curtains stirring across the street. She glanced inside the house, looked back at Lorna and Kaye, and said, "Both of you, come in."

Delores led the two of them into the living room, where Bill Bono lay sprawled on the cream-colored sofa, dead to the world. He had dropped off during the seventh inning stretch and no amount of bat cracking or organ riffs could stir him. Now that the pennant race was heating up, Delores had noticed Bill's new routine and found it most distasteful. Unless she shook him, he would lie in his half-drunken, semi-comatose state.

He would only return to life when his unconscious mind detected the sound of the announcer's voices recapping the final box scores. When it was done, he'd shut off the tube, pop a fresh Pabst Blue Ribbon, and ask, "What's for dinner?" No matter what Delores offered to prepare for him, Bill always wanted steak.

As Lorna stepped into the room she spotted a large crystal server, containing mounds of Allsorts licorice, her husband's favorite, on the coffee table. Her eyes traveled from the dish and past a beer bottle to the lanky figure of a man stretched across the Empire-style couch. The bastard, she thought. I'm going to murder him. It took all of Lorna's strength to resist the temptation

to smash the bowl over his head and bury shards of the fancy cut-glass deep in his brain.

She'd missed more than a few masses since her wedding day, but as one of the Lord's flock, Lorna told herself that she was still entitled to submit a prayer. And if ever there was a time for praying, now was it. She rolled her eyes to the ceiling while she silently talked to God, giving it all she had. She could see the crucifix, the altar, the priest and aldermen, the stained-glass windows, parishioners and pews in her mind's eye as she silently vowed, Dear God in Heaven... it's Lorna Oliveri Bono. I know I'm not perfect and neither is Bill. I don't want him, but I need him. I don't know if I can ever love him again, but I will try. Please give me a chance, and I promise you that I'll do my best. In Jesus' name, Amen."

"Bill," Delores said, shaking him by the shoulders. "It's time to go home now." Lorna breathed a sigh of relief and, remembering her prayer, again rolled her eyes and said a silent thank-you to God.

"DADDY, it's time to come home!" Kaye squealed in a singsong I-told-you-so voice from the end of the couch. She clawed the candy bowl, stuffed her mouth with Allsorts, and whooped like a rain dancer around the room.

"Wha... Wha... What?" Bill's arms flailed across his face at the sound and sight of the two women hovering over him. The helpless housemate looked at Delores and winced. He was being dismissed. Her lips were ordering him out in a motion so slow and clear that even a blind man would see that it was time for him to L-E-A-V-E.

For an instant Bill thought about resisting, but reconsidered at the sobering realization that his odds of success were zero. He had pushed away reality with thoughts of a new life. But reality had prevailed, and Bill knew that a war with Lorna was unwinnable. His mother, Ida, had warned him not to get involved with her—that she was a *bastia gramma*—whatever that meant in Italian, he wasn't sure, but he was beginning to suspect it had something to do with pain and eternal damnation. "Lord help me and save me—kill me now!" Bill threw up his hands.

Like a drowning man, Bill looked over at Delores. Her arms were crossed, and she wore a crisp, hardened smile. He cringed, imagining what Lorna had likely told her. And Kaye, leaping and squealing like a demonic jack-in-the-box. She even dragged my kid along. Over his three-year-old daughter's shoulder, Bill lingered for one last glimpse of the postgame Yankees recap and, digging deep for one final connection with his male independence and Delores's RCA Victor color television, moaned, "Damn! They blew it seven to six in the tenth."

“Time to come home Daddy.” Bill ducked to avoid the licorice drool that trickled onto his forehead. “Pee-yew—beer breath, Mommy!” Kaye looked at her mother and made a face.

Knowing that his delusional fantasy of life on the other side of the tracks was over, Bill gingerly raised himself from the couch.

“I’ll get my things,” Bill mumbled.

“They’ll be sent.” Delores looked at the floor. “Just go.”

“Delores...” Bill began.

“No, Bill.” Delores’ stare was cold; her manner left no room for debate. In her eyes Bill could see... do the right thing—go home to take care of Kaye and your unborn child—find a way to tolerate Lunatic Lorna, and it’ll do you good to go without steak for a while.

Delores watched silently as the small family shuffled across her lawn. Bill opened the driver’s door, but Lorna ordered him over to the passenger side with a long, hard stare. Kaye jumped in the front seat, happy to snuggle between her Mommy and Daddy. Delores watched her former lover slump against the door and stare helplessly out the window as his wife started the engine.

Delores lingered in the doorway, dazed by the surreal events of the last half hour. Relieved to be free of the deception, she was even more grateful not to be Lorna Bono. It wasn’t so much the thought of having to tolerate Bill—he wouldn’t be much of a challenge as long as there was a TV in the living room and beer in the fridge—it was little Kaye who troubled her. How could a mother endure such a child? In a panic, Delores made a silent vow to avoid motherhood altogether, telling herself that if one could end up with an offspring like *that*, then parenting was far too risky. She crossed herself and closing her eyes, sought strength in banishing the precocious three-year-old from her memory.

But no matter how tightly she squinted, she couldn’t erase the sight of the child’s soft indigo pallor or the intensity of her owlish glare. Little Kaye’s soundless warning to *do the right thing or I’ll haunt you for the rest of your life* echoed in her head. It would be another fifteen years before John Lennon would introduce the word “aura” to the United States and twenty-five more before people would acquire any insight about the clairvoyant gifts possessed by crystal children, but Delores knew she had witnessed something out of the ordinary.

Her chest tightened as she recalled the 1947 news reports of flying saucers and strange space visitors in Roswell, New Mexico and the sightings of alien beings in West Virginia in 1952. A chill crept through Delores as a scene from the sci-fi thriller *Psycho Daughter from Hell* flashed in Delores’



mind, along with the dread that one day the world would recoil in distress from a headline featuring the firstborn child of Bill and Lorna Bono.

She laughed to release the tension and told herself that she could use an icy cold, double-sized Tom Collins. And as Delores Hackbarth gently closed her front door, the Bono family pattered down the street, returning to life as it had been before the grieving widow had required a blood test.