

Only A Memory Away - The Dave and Vi Stogner Story

CHAPTER SIX **Fresno, California** **1970-1971**

It was as if Vi were in a trance. Her eyes seemed as though they were looking into a distant sunset. She sat forward in her chair. Her words appeared seamless, beyond time and boundaries as she spoke.

Dave had moved away to Bakersfield. For eight years I saw very little of him. I knew that he was still involved in radio and television, fiddle playing and releasing records. He had again said no when asked to come to Nashville the second time. He didn't want to do that much performing. He had told me before that some of the finest people he knew were Opry people, but it just wasn't for him. Anyway, that is about all I knew about him for a long time. Dave always stayed in my mind, though. I thought of him often and I had hoped that I was in his thoughts as well.

During those eight years, everything just went downhill for me. I had grown further and further away from my husband. I knew I had a loveless marriage and I knew I was a mess. Dan had gone into the Navy and when he was in Vietnam I worried constantly. I tried to do what I could to keep myself busy. I started taking classes to get my high school diploma. My husband had me working in his appliance store then, too. I'd try to do my homework while I was there, but he'd criticize me if he found me doing that instead of doing things in the store.

I had been taking diet pills and nerve pills that had been prescribed by my doctor for about seven years. The pills finally caught up with me. I felt part of me was high and part of me was low. I couldn't put my two bodies together. My weight went down to 109 lbs. I even had to stop driving my car. I was depressed over my marriage and I felt I had no life.

Michael was going to school at the University of Hawaii, during some of this time. When his father and I had the opportunity to buy a cabin in the mountains, Michael helped us with some of the finances. I spent time furnishing and decorating the place. I did a lot of walking around the area and I started trout fishing. It's so peaceful and beautiful there, and it was such a refuge for me at that time. This place saved me when I decided to get off the pills I was taking. I just did it, cold turkey. Needless to say, that wasn't easy! Even though I was

regaining my mental and physical health, my emotional health was still suffering.

Dave had strayed away from the music business, for a while, when he started a new business. He provided aluminum siding and awnings for mobile homes. That had him working ten hours a day. I knew he couldn't stay away from music for long, though. Music was his life. Occasionally, the mobile home business would bring him back to Fresno. His son, David, lived there and did some work for Dave.

My husband and I went to a party one evening, and there was Dave. We couldn't talk privately, but all my feelings for him came back. It was so sad to not be able to talk to him. I didn't want to get something started and end up getting hurt again, though. The next day I heard a Merle Haggard song, *Today I Started Loving You Again*. I just started to cry. I couldn't help it.

Dave eventually moved from Bakersfield to Ridgecrest, out in the desert. He put together another band and was playing fiddle enough for him to enjoy it. He had said it wasn't a profession, anymore. Then one day in the fall of 1970, he was working in Fresno. He stopped by Harry's house. They were still good friends which is why I knew as much as I did about him. I just happened to call my brother while Dave was there.

Harry didn't know anything about us at that time. He just said, "Guess who is at my house?" When I heard it was Dave, I asked him to let me talk to him for a minute.

He told Harry to tell me that he'd stop by my house in a few minutes. He did come right over to see me. We stood in the entry hall. I was happy and sad. I told him I thought we had made a mistake in the past by caring for one another so much.

He said to me straight out, "I loved you then, I love you now, and I'll always love you." I told him that he had never left my heart. Still, there was nothing we could do.

It was spring of the next year before we saw each other again. Dave said he wanted to talk to me. I told him I needed to talk to him. He thought it was probably about the same thing. When we had a brief opportunity to be alone, he told me how much he had worried about me. He wondered if he had caused me to be like I was. I told him no that it wasn't that. It was just the circumstances of my life. He said he knew he needed to come and get me out of that situation. He had told one of his brothers about me. His brother had told him, if he thought that much about me to, "Go get her!"

Then Dave took me into his arms and kissed me a long, sweet kiss. As we held each other, he told me he would call me the next day. I think I was thrilled and skeptical at the same time. I responded with a remark, "You don't remember my phone number!"

But, sure enough, the next day my phone rang and it was Dave. He said, "I want to be with you for keeps. I want to wake up by your side." I told him, "Look what we started again. What made us think we could just be friends." After that, he began calling me every other day.

Then it happened. This is what I had only dreamed of for so long. It was late summer of 1971, when one day Dave called and asked me to marry him. I answered him with disbelief because I didn't think it was possible for us to be together. I said, "I'm not even divorced!"

He told me I had better make up my mind. He said he'd wait for me, but he couldn't wait forever. I was so mixed up. I didn't know what to do. I knew I had thought I'd leave my husband as soon as the boys were older, Dave or no Dave. I thought about having to leave my home. I thought I didn't want to give up all my material things. My husband had just let me pick out new furniture. I hadn't been feeling well. These were just some of the thoughts going through my mind. No matter how difficult or troubled your life is, it isn't easy to break away from it. I loved Dave so much, though, that I had to start making choices.

One good thing was that our four sons were out on their own. I knew my boys thought highly of Dave, and that his sons cared for me. My best girlfriend told me to do what my heart told me. So I did. Dave and I started making plans together. We'd ask for divorces, then he and I would get married. This was far from simple.

Harry and his wife, Kay, had been on me for a long time about leaving because my life was so bad. Harry and I had always been so close, but I had never told them about Dave and me. So when I did tell them, they were very surprised. They were ready to leave for a two-week vacation.

Harry was beside himself and said, "My God, I'm leaving! Wait! Don't do a thing until I get back!" Harry and Kay wanted to help me. And, God knew I needed help.

I started gathering some of my personal things and storing them at their house. I knew for sure I was leaving my husband, and that I was going to marry Dave. We made a plan to leave on a weekend in September to go to Las Vegas.

An odd thing happened the weekend just before then. Dave stopped by the house on Friday afternoon. My husband asked him to go with us to our cabin, so that the two of them could go deer hunting. Dave had never been deer hunting with him, but he agreed to go. My husband drove, and the three of us headed for Cedar Valley.

On the way, my husband stopped at a liquor store in Oakhurst and bought a bottle of Jack Daniel whiskey. He started drinking straight from the bottle. We drove farther up the mountain and came to Snowline Lodge. They played Country music there, so we decided to go inside. A bunch of Dave's friends were there performing. We sat in a booth and ordered drinks. I was uncomfortable. My husband was acting a little strange. He kept going outside to the car to drink his

whiskey. I noticed his behavior became stranger as the night went on.

Dave went up on stage and sat in for a few songs. Then, he asked me to dance. I danced with my husband, too, just to make him happy. I was sitting at a booth with him when Dave came and sat down by me. My husband just stared at us. If looks could kill, we would have been dead. Dave got up to do another song. My husband ordered me to sit on his side of the booth. I asked him, and not in very kind words, what was wrong with him?

My husband said to me, "I bet it's hell having your boyfriend and your husband here at the same time, isn't it?"

I knew then that he knew something about us. I didn't know how he had found out. No one had told him that I knew of. I guessed he had just sensed something because of the trouble we had been having. I didn't know. Before we left, I let Dave know what he had said. After midnight, we got in the car and rode another four miles to the cabin. By then, my husband was so drunk that Dave and I were very scared of what he might be planning.

We all went into the cabin. Dave built a fire and I made coffee. We sat around the kitchen table and made small talk, until my husband announced he was going to bed. He told Dave they would get up at six o'clock in the morning and go hunting. Dave and I sat there and talked. We drank coffee and smoked cigarette after cigarette.

I warned Dave that my husband had a .30-30 rifle, and said I didn't want Dave to go with him on the hunting trip. Early in my marriage when I had threatened to leave my husband, he had told me he'd kill me if I ever did. I had never forgotten that. Even though I hadn't thought he would, that night I wasn't so sure what he might do.

When my husband awoke the next morning, he came out to go hunting. Dave told him he wasn't feeling very well, so he wasn't going with him. After my husband went out of the cabin, I warned Dave not to go onto the deck. I told him my husband had a powerful scope on his rifle. I was so afraid. We were both sweating it out. We just sat inside the cabin and planned our getaway.

Dave tried to comfort me by talking about us being together. He gently said, "I placed you on a pedestal, maybe too high for anyone to live up to. You mean so much to me. Someday you'll know how much I love you."

When my husband returned from hunting, he made some remarks and commented to me about all the cigarette butts in the ashtray. Finally, around one in the afternoon we all left the cabin and drove back to Fresno. Dave got out of the car at his son's place. He had told me not to stay in my house that night.

As we drove off to our house, all hell broke loose! We got into a big argument,

and I was screaming and crying. When I got out of the car, I ran into the house and phoned Kay. She came right over and picked me up. She told my husband that she'd calm me down, and that I could spend the night with her and Harry.

The next day they both went to my house to pick up some things I wanted. I gave all my keys to Kay and I never returned to my house again. Two days later, Harry drove me to a prearranged place to meet Dave. He was there waiting for us in a new Ford pickup.

Harry told him, "Dave, you have a job on your hands!"

On October 25, 1971, we headed for Las Vegas. I was so nervous and distressed after what we had been through, all I could say over and over was, "Oh, Boy! Oh, Boy! Oh, Boy!"

Dave thought he might have to take me back to Fresno. We stayed in Bakersfield that night. It had been an ordeal to get us that far. We just held each other all night. We couldn't believe we were together.

We drove on to Las Vegas the next day. I fell asleep on the way. When I woke up, it was twilight and we were looking down over all of Las Vegas. I looked out of the truck window at the bright, city lights. I was in awe at the sight. We celebrated that night. Dave took me to see one of my favorite entertainers, Fats Domino, at the Stardust Inn. We sat there and looked at each other.

Dave said to me, "Darlin', we did it!"

We had to be residents of Las Vegas for six weeks and not leave the state to be able to get a divorce there. We found a small apartment to rent for that time. We even rented a television. Dave hadn't brought much of anything with him, not even a coat. Harry and Kay soon sent a care package, including a leather jacket for him. My family supported Dave and me.

Of course, continual thoughts go through a person's mind when they are making such a life changing decision. What gave me the reassurance I needed right then was a card I received through general delivery from Michael. I read that card over and over. What Michael wrote in it meant so much to me.

"Beautiful Mother of Mine, This is not a letter asking why, because I really do understand the why. This is a letter wishing you all the happiness that you can get out of life. Mother, remember that philosophy was my major in college? I know that at times you probably wondered why I took courses in philosophy-- well, my mind has been opened to many ideas and concepts. One philosophy which has ruled my life is simply, 'Life is for living'--we're only on this earth for a short time, so you had better make it good while you are here. The philosophy of this card is very heavy- -but please remember it--

and enjoy your life and freedom. You are right. No one has the right to own another person. We all have the right to fly and express our true being. So, do it and do not worry what the people might say. They are probably secretly wishing that they could do the same thing! Mother- please use your new-found freedom wisely-- make it last and enjoy it as long as possible. All My love, Your son Michael."

Our divorces were filed, and we lived in Las Vegas for the necessary time. The first two weeks we just rested. Then, we went to lawyers' offices and had a number of things we had to tend to. We spent some evenings going to shows. Dave, of course, started playing fiddle at some clubs on the outskirts of the city. One night at the Fremont Motel, we ran into Marty Robbins. That is when I first met him. He and Dave had been close friends for a long time. It was hard to go anywhere without running into people who knew Dave.

One day while we were driving on Las Vegas Boulevard, a song played on the radio. I said to Dave that it sounded like it was about him. He laughed and said it was! He told me Johnny Russell had written the song about him in 1955. He had wanted Dave to record it. It even had a twin fiddle turn around. Dave never did, but Johnny had recorded it a few years later. Now here was one of Dave's good friends even singing to him on the radio!

Hey, Mr. Fiddle Man/ Strike up your fiddle band/ Then let me hear that song one more time/ Please play that song again/ The way you did back then/ When she was here and she was mine /Then I'll move on down the line...

When the six weeks were up, we left Las Vegas. As we were driving away, I asked Dave, "You love me now, but will you keep loving me?"

He answered, "I'll love you for a thousand years!"