

Only A Memory Away - The Dave and Vi Stogner Story

(A history of his music and their romance)

CHAPTER TEN

Corralitos September 1999

Vi tried to control her emotions as she walked through the doorway of the dressing room. Old memories that had been stored away came flooding back when she spotted Bethany in her pure white wedding gown. Her granddaughter was standing there looking so lovely as her bridesmaids were putting on her veil that trailed to the floor from a wreath of small flowers. Her long, blond hair was braided with tiny pink roses. Vi had never cried at anybody's wedding, but she couldn't help herself now. She began to cry in joy and remembrance.

"Oh, Nana, why are you crying?" Bethany asked as she put her arms around her grandmother.

"I don't know, honey, I guess I'm thinking about your Papa today, and how he would have loved to be here to see you. I know he would have been playing his fiddle and singing to you. And, I know just the song! It's one he recorded called, *You're As Pretty As a Picture.*" As the tune played in Vi's head, she began to smile.

*You're as pretty as a picture/Prettier, too/If I should ever lose you/
Don't know what I'd do/Your sweeter than an angel/And sweetheart
it's true/ I'm always in Heaven/When I'm with you/I've been up and
down/and round and round/But no where could I find/Anyone that
could compare with you/ Baby you're divine/You're as lovely as an
orchid/Lovelier, too/I could never tell you/ How much I love you.*

Bethany had been twelve years old when her grandfather passed away, but he was on her mind that day, as well. She had remembered how he had always said he was going to play for her wedding just like he had played at her baby dedication. "Papa is here with us," she said assuredly. "He's here in spirit. I can feel him." Her bridesmaids left the room, so she could spend a few minutes with her grandmother.

"After all, Nana, if it weren't for Papa I might not be here." Bethany was recalling what she had been told about her parents' marriage, and how significant her grandfather had been to the events surrounding it.

Marie walked into the room as she was talking and asked her to tell her what had happened back then. Bethany began to relate the story of an accident that had occurred near Coarsegold, shortly after her grandparents had moved there.

It was autumn of 1973, and Dave had been asked to play at the Mountaineer Days celebration in Oakhurst. Michael and Dawna were driving back from Monterey to see him perform. Coming up the mountain on Highway 41, they ran out of gas. They had a gas container in the van, so Michael got out and began to put the gas into the van's tank. Their dog jumped out of the van, so Dawna got out with it and began to pick up some pine cones. As a truck came around a curve in the road, their dog ran out into its path. As the truck driver swerved to miss the dog, the truck hit Dawna. The impact knocked her down a steep embankment as the truck came to a stop against a tree.

She fell a long way down and out of sight of Michael. He ran to the spot where she went over, but he couldn't find her. He was frantically searching for her as he was screaming her name. Finally, he was able to hear her moan, and this led him to where she lay.

This mountain road wasn't well traveled, so it took time to get help to them. The Highway Patrol arrived, and finally an ambulance. Where she had fallen was a difficult area to get down to, but the rescuers reached her and were able to get her up the embankment on a stretcher. She was taken to a hospital in Fresno.

Michael was there for her, and her mother came to be by her side. Her mother was so distraught, she feared her daughter was going to die. Dave tried to comfort her. He told her Dawna was not going to die! For a while, they were all very fearful that she would. It was a terrible time.

Dawna spent three months in the hospital. Her legs were in traction, and she had to have a full body cast. Dave was her biggest supporter. He talked to her all the time. He'd tell her that she would walk again and that she would ski again, too. He was there for her and he wouldn't let her give up. Dave is who brought her back to them. When she was released from the hospital, Michael took her to the cabin at Cedar Valley. She had to be in the body cast for quite some time while she healed.

Michael and Dawna made a plan to be baptized and married on February 14, 1974, in a private service. Michael had to carry her up to the altar because she was still unable to walk. On March 24, 1974, at The Little Church in the Pines at Bass Lake, they had a formal wedding in the presence of family and friends. She had set her mind on walking down the aisle unaided and she did. Michael thought he might have to carry her back up the aisle. With determination, though, she walked along side him.

The next day she was unable to walk, so Michael carried her from place to place while they prepared to leave for their honeymoon. He took her to Mazatlan, Mexico to give her time in the warm sun to recover. It was even thought that she

might not be able to have children. She went on to have three, though, and they adopted their son, Jason. He had come to live with them around the time Lucas was born.

"Papa was there for my mother, and I know he is here for me," Bethany said with the glint of a tear in the corner of her eye. Vi couldn't have been more touched by the feelings Bethany had for Dave.

Just then, Dawna came in to help her daughter with some finishing touches. Marie and Vi hugged them both, and then they went out to talk with guests. Vi saw Anne Steinhardt walking up the path toward them with fiddle case in hand. She was so glad to see Anne. It had been a long time.

Anne looked at Vi and thought to herself, "It has been ten years since I have seen Vi. She is a little rounder, her creamy complexion is a little more creased, but that same bright, youthful spirit is peering from her blue eyes." She greeted Vi, saying how good it was to hear her same friendly Oklahoma accent.

Vi declared, "I'm seventy-two years old and I've never lost my accent, and my grandkids don't let me live it down!" They both laughed.

She told Anne how she was putting together a CD of Dave's music. She pulled the liner notes and pictures out of her purse to show Anne. She even had some order forms. Anne realized Dave was still the motivating inspiration of Vi's life. Unlike the Bob Wills ballad *Faded Love* that Anne had played twin fiddles on with Dave, she could see that their love lived on "unfaded."

Marie commented to Anne, "Vi had those CDs made around August to give as gifts for Christmas. She took the old LPs to the recording studio, had them mastered, and made the labels, too. After that she thought to sell them. Dave had the love of a woman to his dying day proclaiming that she would not give up on him even in death."

Vi told them, "I loved Dave and he loved me. You don't run into our kind of love, but once in a lifetime. I made a promise to him that I intend to keep."

By then, it was just about time for the ceremony to begin for Bethany and the love of her life. She had met Jeff when they were both summer counselors at Camp Hammer, a Christian camping facility in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Bethany had realized early in their relationship that Jeff was very similar to her Papa. They both had a fun-loving sense of humor and a true joy for life. They also shared a love for sports, music, and spoiling their girls. Most importantly they both displayed an amazing amount of tenderness and compassion for those they love. Her Nana had told her that she had found a man that her Papa would have been very proud to call his grandson.

Bethany and Jeff had chosen to have their wedding in Corralitos where her

parents lived. Their neighbors had a lovely flower garden on a hillside that overlooked the Monterey Bay. The ceremony was to be performed at sunset on a summery September afternoon in the open field area of the garden. Bethany had always wanted a romantic renaissance-style wedding.

A harpist began to strum a soft Celtic melody. Over two hundred guests were seated with the ocean behind them in the distance. Vi was escorted to her seat by her grandson, Lucas, followed by Dawna on the arm of her son, Jason. The bridesmaids, dressed in pale yellow Empire-waist gowns and holding bouquets of wild flowers, slowly began to walk down the aisle towards Jeff and the groomsmen. They were standing beneath an archway of redwood branches that were intertwined with flowers and tulle.

The harpist changed the melody to announce the entrance of the bride. There stood "a princess" on the arm of her father. Her gown was an Empire-waist satin and sheer fabric, embroidered with satin and pearl beadwork with small daisies. Its flowing sleeves reached the ground, as did her long train. The setting was breathtaking and truly romantic. The ceremony itself was not long, but it was personal and full of emotion. It was a dream come true for Papa's girl.

Bethany's brother, Jacob, was one of the groomsmen. He must have had some of his grandfather's humor in him that day. As the bride and groom kissed, he and the other young groomsmen held up signs to rate the kiss! Everyone laughed. Dave would have liked that.

When they were introduced as husband and wife, they faced their guests. As their family and friends applauded them, Jeff scooped his bride up into his arms and carried her up the aisle just as her father had once done for her mother. Following the ceremony, the guests gathered in the patio while the photographer occupied the wedding party.

Vi had been given the responsibility of getting the band for the wedding reception. She had called Tom Miller, Dave's former agent from O.T. Price's. He had suggested Ginny Mitchell, a musician who Dave had encouraged and befriended when they lived in Santa Cruz. Ginny had asked some other musicians who knew Dave to join her. They were all there, set up, and ready to perform for the reception.

As the band began playing, though, it seemed for the musicians that there was something missing. They couldn't seem to get it together. One of the band members told Vi that they didn't seem to have any zip that day. Shortly after their conversation, all of a sudden the band started playing right. They said it was as though Dave's spirit had visited them saying, "Pep it up! Pep it up!"

Anne had been asked by Vi to play *Orange Blossom Special* in honor of Dave. As she brought up her bow and began to fiddle, Jeff twirled Bethany around onto the dance floor. Bethany was thinking of her Papa. She knew in her heart just how happy he was for her. She could feel it in this music's exhilarating tempo that he

had fiddled so many times. She knew she was so proud of him, and that he'd always be a cherished presence in her life. She knew, too, that she'd always have him to sing and play for her through the music legacy he had left.

As Anne fiddled with the band's accompaniment, the bride and groom happily danced. Along side them, Dan was dancing with his mother. Michael and Dawna were kicking up their heels, and Marie passed by dancing with Dustin. They were all laughing and having a wonderful time.

The music made Vi think of David and Daryl. She remembered something Daryl had said one time about their father. "We would always get to laughing at Dad. Usually, it was when he was in the middle of playing Orange Blossom Special. Not always, but sometimes he'd be so into playing that tune, he'd actually saw the hair off his bow! He'd have horsehair flying all over the place, and we'd be laughing so hard we'd be in tears. He could stand there talking into a TV camera while picking the torn bow hairs off of his bow. He never missed a beat or a note, and it never seemed to cause him to miss a step when announcing a commercial or the next song. I've seen other musicians break strings and lose it, but not Dad. He was in his element and even though he was a total professional when he played, it was fun to him."

When they finished dancing, Bethany walked over to her grandmother. She was aglow with a beautiful smile, but her tone was almost sad, "Nana, I know you found your one true love with Papa, and now I've found mine with Jeff. I wish you could have had a longer time to share that love with him. Seventeen years was a short time. It just wasn't long enough at all."

"I agree with you, Bethany," remarked Marie who was standing next to Vi. "Sharing a love like the two of them had should have been for a much longer time."

It was after hearing this that Vi realized that she had been feeling such a desire to tell her family about the years before she and Dave were married. He was the love of most of her life and deep down inside she had known for a long time that she needed to tell of their love. Now she knew that eventually she could. A warm feeling came over Vi at that special moment. Love was in the air and so was the spirit of Dave "Papa" Stogner.