

Heavy Prices

By Aniyah Veal

Tuesday 2:32 am

May sat on her bed, with her feet dangling off the side. Despite having been awake for more than an hour, she couldn't shake her post nightmare uneasiness. She would have been sitting in the dark, phone clutched in her hand, if it wasn't for the random infomercials that flashed across her tv. May knew it was too early to be awake and yet, she couldn't turn her mind off. Every time she tried to lay down and close her eyes, she would see her brother sitting in that courtroom. She couldn't move the heavy weight pressing down on her chest as she heard that cruel judge sentencing Dave to life in prison. Of course, the rational part of her mind kept repeating the real facts. It was just a nightmare and one she knew well. Her real Dave was sentenced to five years and was out within three. Her Dave has already been out for more than a year. The real Dave was free.

It was this same part of her brain that told May that it was ridiculous for her, a grown woman, to be this affected by one of her common nightmares. She reasoned to herself that Dave didn't deserve to be disturbed at this time at night and she knew that she wasn't ready to talk about her nightmare and open that can of worms. He didn't need to know how often she still thought about their time apart and how scared she was of losing him again, of being alone again. She didn't want him to feel even more worried or guilty about his past so she kept it all in.

After pushing the power button for what felt like the hundredth time in five minutes, May's mind focused on her lock screen photo. It was a selfie of Dave and herself during one of their many IHOP visits. There wasn't anything so special about that day, but she loved their

matching smiles as they leaned back in their booth, hands resting on their stuffed stomachs. Looking at the screen made her want to smile, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. May was done putting off the inevitable. With a shake of her head, she unlocked the phone and sent the text that she had left as a draft before she could stop herself again. Almost immediately, May was startled by the ringing of her phone. She took a quick breath in and answered the phone.

“Sorry, hope I didn't wake you up.”

“Don't worry about it. Everything good?”

“I'm fine, can't sleep though. Are you okay?”

“I'm cool. You need me to come over or something? You sound off.”

“No, I just needed to hear your voice. Go back to sleep.”

“Are you sure? You know I'm not too far.”

“I'm positive so relax. I'll see you on Saturday and be here on time for once. Love ya.”

“Alright, love you too.”

May hung up her phone, plugged her charger in and laid the phone on her nightstand. She found it crazy how a phone call that lasted less than two minutes could calm down something that had been building inside of her for an hour. Quickly, she finally fell back asleep peacefully.

Saturday 5:56 pm

Dave sat on the bottom step of the house with his head in his hands. He shifted on the step as he tried and failed to become comfortable. Sitting on the concrete step for a half hour had made him tenser. He thought about the small box in his backpack as he scratched his neck. He tried to focus on the sunset instead of the multiple possibilities of the night running through his

mind. He became distracted by the vibrations in his back pocket. He reached for his phone and sighed as he saw her contact name.

“Hey, I thought you said you were on the way. That was an hour ago,” May stated in confusion.

“Oh yeah, I had to make a stop first. I’m parking right now. Come open the door.”

“Okay, I’m coming,” May said excitedly.

“Alright,” he said as he chuckled. He hung up the phone and quickly stood up to appear like he was just arriving. He heard the door open before even turning around.

“Dave!” She ran to her brother, reaching him before he could step onto the porch. She had a pencil tucked behind her ear and Dave knew she had probably been writing to pass the time.

“May, you just saw me last week.”

“It’s been a long week. Can’t I miss my big brother?” May pulled him inside in a hurry and plopped them on the couch as she spoke.

Dave held up his hands in mock surrender as he said, “Of course, you can’t help yourself. I’m just that great.”

“Shut up.” May playfully slapped his arm.

"Now, what do I have to do to get a bottle of water in this house?"

"You can get up and go get it yourself," May sassed with an exaggerated eye roll.

"I am a guest here, why should I move?"

"Whatever, I guess you'll go thirsty then. You know your way to the kitchen. Don't be lazy."

May's laughter followed Dave into the kitchen. He stepped in front of the refrigerator to get a nice bottle of cold water when he had to pause. Hanging on the refrigerator was a picture of May and himself on the day he was released. May insisted that she drive up to the prison and pick him up. It had only been a couple of weeks since she had visited for the last time, but they squeezed each other like it had been a lifetime. After they hugged, May took a picture of them right then and there. Dave felt something strong when he looked at himself standing outside of the gate.

"Getting water is taking so long. Are you that slow?" May's teasing cut through Dave's thoughts. He chuckled before grabbing a water bottle out of the fridge and walking back over to the couch.

"Finally, you're such a sloth. Anyway, which place should we get the food from tonight? You can pick, but I am choosing the movie because you pick the worst ones."

"Hold on, we need to talk first," Dave said seriously. May twisted to face him more as the smile on her face dropped slightly.

"Okay, what's wrong?"

"What happened to you Monday? And don't lie about it."

"Nothing happened to me, why would you ask that?"

"You called me in the middle of the night and—"

"—I told you not to wo—"

"—and I have your bracelet, May"

"W-what?"

Dave reached for his bag and he pulled out a small jewelry box. Seeing the doubt and confusion on her face, Dave opened the box and placed it on the glass coffee table. Dave heard her gasp before glancing at her shocked face. May's eyes shifted back and forth from the table to her brother warily. Her hand shook slightly as she put her bracelet, her only keepsake from their parents, back on her wrist. Dave avoided her face as he continued to stare at his feet, an easier sight to stomach. That didn't stop him from imagining the happiness, the worry and finally the anger on her face. May opened and closed her mouth several times before she could actually form words. Dave heard each slow, deep breath that she took.

"H-how did you get this, Dave," May said as her voice trembled.

"It doesn't matter. Why didn't you tell me that you were robbed?"

"It happened Thursday afternoon. I went to the police and made a report. I was going to tell you eventually and I would have told you if I got hurt. Don't dodge my question, how did you get my bracelet back?"

"I think you're already assuming the way that I got it, sis."

"I need to hear you explain this. It doesn't matter what I assume, David," she said firmly, emphasizing the use of his full name.

"I saw someone with it. I read the engraving, and long story short, I took it back. I couldn't let him keep something that's yours. He's lucky that he didn't end up worse," he said tensely.

"Who's this someone? Where would you have even seen that guy?" she asked with suspicion.

Dave sighed and began, "I've been catching up with some of the guys that I knew on the inside. They looked out for me there so I wanted to see them."

"Oh so you've only been 'catching up'," she snapped back.

"May, I have bills to pay. I need money when I need it," he replied as he turned towards her.

"That's why you have your job. It's been working for this long so what's the problem now?"

"Look, I didn't want to tell you this because you'll worry but, I haven't been working at that job for a couple months now. I was fired," Dave's voice got lower and lower as he continued to stare at the ground.

"So you've been stealing all this time? And lying to me about it all? Going right back to the same thing that got you sent to jail in the first place." May's voice was heavy.

"There's not too many people looking to hire an ex-con these days."

"That's just an excuse. You keep going until you find the ones that will." Dave stayed quiet.

"We're supposed to tell each other everything and look out for each other. You know, you didn't lie to me to stop me from worrying, you lied because you couldn't face me and own your mess."

Dave knew she would act like this, but he also knew how to calm her down. Or so he thought. He put his hand on her shoulder, but it was shrugged off. May moved to the other end of the couch and stared straight ahead. She grabbed the box and put the lid back on. She looked at

the box before she shoved it into her brother's chest and let it go. Startled, Dave looked at her for an explanation.

Without turning to face him, she said, "Go and pawn my bracelet. Use the money until you find a real job. Just make sure you get it back to me."

"May, I can't take your bracelet from Moms and Pops and besides...I've tried a regular job. It's not what I'm meant to do," Dave said hesitantly.

"So you are meant to steal from innocent people? Steal from their homes? Steal from them when they are walking past an alleyway? Or are you going to be one of those people trying to rob banks or jewelry stores? You've elevated, is that it?" she questioned coldly and quietly. She was answered with silence.

"I'm offering you help and you would rather take the easy way out. Do you know where you will end up AGAIN?!?!"

"Calm down, I don't want to fight with you. Just calm down," Dave said steadily trying to calm down his frustrated sister, even while his brain absorbed her logical reasoning. May stood up and looked down at him.

"You come over to my house, drop this bomb on me and then sit here calmly. You want me to 'calm down.' Are you kidding me?" May said in disbelief.

"May, I love you, but I don't need a lecture from you or anyone else."

"I'm so tired of always biting my tongue, David. You're going to listen to me lecture for however long I need to because I've earned the right."

May vented and vented. She talked about how devastated she felt in the courtroom, how she felt having to visit a prison house every month for the sake of both of their sanities and how

he left her. She was a young girl with parents who had been dead for more than a decade, with no foster parents who cared enough to reach out after she turned eighteen and with no brother to tell her that she was going to be okay. Dave learned that the only nightmares May had were all about him being sent away forever or being killed in the streets. The one thing that became clear for him was that May was honestly terrified. He hated that he was the one to make her feel that way. He hated even more that he didn't know if he would ever be able to take those fears away.

"You're always thinking about you and I'm always thinking about you. David, who's actually thinking about me? No one, that's who. So I have to think of me. I can't keep letting you do this to me."

"I didn't know you felt like that about everything. I'm really sorry, May," May stepped closer and grabbed Dave's hand before he continued, "But I know this time is going to be different."

May dropped his hand and said, "You've heard absolutely nothing that I've said. I know you can't change overnight, but are you even willing to try? I guess you can't care about me if you can't care about yourself... "

"I won't do it forever. I'll save up and stop when I have enough. These guys will look out for me. I'm not going back there ever again, I promise. This is the best way-" Dave was interrupted by a smack to the left side of his face.

"You're really trying to look me in the eyes and tell me how good breaking the law will be for you? How can you make any promise to me when you're not in control? Wow... I'm tired of making excuses for you. Y-you keep doing this to us, Dave," May said with tears dropping

from her eyes. She sniffed and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. May stepped back when Dave went to grab her again.

“Stay right here for a minute,” she said quietly as she walked away.

She came back with a piece of paper in her hand. Dave would have had to be blind to not see how the paper shook in her grasp. She told him to stand up as she grabbed his backpack for him. She led him to her front door and stopped in front of it.

“So you’re kicking me out now? You don’t want to do this, I don’t want to go,” he said as he allowed himself to show real panic. This felt different from any other fight they’ve had. It felt final.

Completely ignoring him, May said, “I’ve been thinking about making a cute superhero character to start a miniseries. I’ve written a couple small stories and my publisher likes it.”

“That’s great, May,” Dave replied with a small smile.

She passed him the piece of paper and said, “This is my second page for every book I write in the miniseries. Take it with you and you think about it as you drive home. Think about it the next time you’re on your way to ‘work.’ I don’t even know if I mean it anymore so people might not ever see it in the books anyway.”

With that being said, she opened the door without looking up at her brother.

“Shut the door behind you,” May said as she walked to her bedroom and slammed the door.

Dave walked outside and resumed his place on the last concrete step. He looked down at the paper in fear. He read the dedication in his mind.

“I dedicate this series to the most surprising hero in my life, my brother. Dave hasn’t always done the best things, but who said heroes have to be perfect? He makes me proud, he’s my hero.”

Dave sat on the step as he composed himself. There was no use in crying if this was his fault. Quickly, he stood up to try and shake the sudden feeling in his chest. He wanted to forget what it felt like immediately. Dave thought about going back in the house, but he was lost on what to say. He wasn’t sure that he could say what May wanted to hear. All he could do was tuck the paper into his bag and walk away.