

## The Thirty-Fourth Anniversary Gift

It was early Saturday morning when Carol drove down the quiet residential street. Pulling up to her destination, she turned the key to shut off the car.

“ ‘Morning Dad!” The dark-haired woman opened the door of her forest green sedan and slid out. Slamming it shut, she moved toward her elderly father. He was already outside setting up but he smiled as he turned toward her.

“Good morning, Carol.” He set a handful of items on a table, freeing his arms to give her a hug. “I’m glad you came. I don’t know if I could do this garage sale by myself all day.”

“That’s what daughters are for. So what’s left to do?” she asked, looking around the driveway at what was already on display.

“I think I have everything out here. Even already had a few people out here taking a look at what I have.” He held up some paper, “I even made \$5 already selling a few of my books!”

“Nice start. But let’s hope we can get rid of more of this stuff.” Carol looked over the things they had decided to get rid of.

“Can you empty out that box onto the table?” Dad pointed a wrinkled finger toward the torn box.

“Sure.” Carol tossed her purse onto an empty chair and got to work. She knelt down next to the box, opening the flaps to rummage through it. One at a time, she unwrapped the glass figurines and set the collection onto the table. But the last one she found was plastic and didn’t match the theme of the others.

“Dad, do you remember how long I have been telling you to get rid of these?” Carol stood and turned to him with a doll in her hands. “This one is so annoying. It’s cartoonish and all it does is bob its head up and down, up and down with this stupid expression!”

Dad smiled as he moved toward her and reached for the item in her hand. “Your mother gave me that on our thirty-fourth anniversary.”

Carol narrowed her eyes. “Were you two fighting that year?”

“No, no, it started as a joke on our first anniversary when all we could afford was the dollar store. She liked the small statues so we each bought one and gave them to the other on our anniversary. After that one time, it became a tradition and we started competing to make the other laugh the hardest at the crazy ones we could find.” He chuckled, “Your mother said this one reminded her of a TV character we enjoyed. Look at that over drawn, comical expression...we had a great laugh when she gave it to me.” Dad handed it back to Carol and turned away, a sorrowful expression washing the smile off his old face. “Her car wreck was barely a month after our anniversary. This was the last thing your mom ever gave me.”

Carol blinked. Her father rarely mentioned the accident that had ended her mother’s life. Even now, over twenty years later, it hurt to talk about it. It had happened so suddenly. Mom was going to the store for groceries to finish preparing dinner and never came back.

Carol stepped toward her elderly father. “Then why get rid of it?”

Dad lowered himself carefully into the green lawn chair in the shade of the house by the porch. “The nursing home doesn’t have room for everything. I don’t want to rent a

storage building that you will have to clean out after I'm gone. Might as well get rid of things now," he sighed, wiping the sweat off his brow.

"Dad, when I suggested you have a garage sale, I didn't mean that you had to get rid of things you treasured."

"I know what you meant, Carol." The man leaned back into the chair glancing at the road before looking over his belongings now spread over the driveway and yard, "I've kept all these things for years but they were just in boxes cluttering up the garage. It is time for someone else to enjoy them. But you know you can keep whatever you want."

Carol's eyes wandered over the garage sale set up. The doll with the bobbing head seemed to stare at her. *This was the last thing my mom gave my dad.*

She had a thought, "Dad, what was the last thing you gave Mom?"

He smiled, "A ring."

"A ring?" Carol's eyebrow raised, "That sounds like an extravagant gift. Did you do something wrong?"

He chuckled, "I don't remember...but I don't think so. We didn't have much money when we first got married so once I could afford it, I liked buying her things."

"Do you still have the ring?"

"Oh yes, I keep it on this necklace," He pulled a silver chain from under his gray sweater. Attached to the chain was a gold ring. "Your mom loved the color of a ruby, so I surprised her with this ruby ring for our anniversary."

Carol moved closer to touch the ring. The setting was a single ruby with two small accent diamonds on either side of the red stone.

“Judy was really surprised.” Dad smiled as he watched his daughter look at the ring, “I remember her face, she was beaming when I gave it to her. She loved it and wore it every day. She was wearing it when she had the car accident. It was pretty scratched up, but it was in better shape than her wedding ring.” Dad blinked back tears, “When they gave me all her belongings at the hospital, everything was such a mess. But the ring...it still looked brand new.”

Carol tried to push away the image his words brought up. Mom died in a major accident along a busy highway just as rush hour traffic started. Carol had wanted to go with her to the store but Mom put her off, “It will just take a few minutes, so you can set the table instead. I will be back before you realize I’m gone and then we can finish cooking dinner together.”

Dad had arrived home an hour later to no dinner and no wife. They waited thirty minutes but concern continued rising as time ticked on. Unsure what to do, the father called the police. Eventually, they were informed of the accident. The years since had been full of grief as they dealt with the loss and faced life without her.

Now Carol turned back to the table of garage sale items and finished emptying the box for buyers. She picked up the cardboard and carried it to the trash can next to the garage. Her eyes traveled back to the doll with the bobbing head. She slowly walked toward it and picked it up. She noticed the fading and gouges from the years but it was a reminder of her parent’s love. She tucked it safely into her purse. Her father had kept it as a treasured keepsake for years. Now it was her turn.