



**THE  
DIE NOTHING  
GROUP**

**A COBURN FAMILY MYSTERY**

**A SHORT STORY**

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**TJ STECKER**



# **The Die Nothing Group**

*A Coburn Family Mystery*

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“Dern, I can’t believe she got another one,” Phoebe Coburn muttered to herself before closing the Facebook page on her computer. Oh well, she thought before standing up from her chair in her makeshift office/gym in the second bedroom of her Three Ponds retirement community house. Phoebe didn’t have time to dwell on missing out on the flask because she had to get ready for her date.

Before she made it to the bathroom, her phone rang. It was Evelyn—no doubt calling about the Buy Nothing group.

Phoebe answered, “I saw, Darla got the flask.”

“Mhmm,” Evelyn said, her slow North Carolina drawl aged her even past her eighty years. “That’s the third item this month. You need to do something; she can’t run the group and get all the good stuff.”

“Me? What can I do?”

“Come on Phoebe, you’re the one with connections. You’re the one she’d listen to.”

“Connections? What are you talking about?”

“The Sheriff’s Office.”

Phoebe shook her head. “This ain’t a police matter and you know I’m not exactly welcome there after the last time.”

“Alright, if you say so. I’m just sayin’ is all.”

“Right, well I’ll talk to her if I see her, but I need to go.”

Darla McCready had started the Three Ponds chapter of the “Buy Nothing” Facebook group about six months ago. The group had been growing in surrounding Alleghany County, North Carolina, where people could post items they didn’t need or want anymore. Lots of it was baby clothes and toys, where moms shared with moms to be, but it turned out there was a pretty good amount of things to be shared within the “seasoned citizen” community—things like the flask Margaret had posted. It was an exotic piece that her late husband had brought back from Tucson years ago. Turquoise and gold—probably brass, but it was pretty. Phoebe had wanted it and thought she was a shoo-in until Darla chimed in— “It’s just like the one my sister has, and I’d love to have one like it,” she’d written. Margaret said she picked a name at random, but Phoebe knew she’d felt pressured to pick Darla since she started the group and all. It wasn’t the first time. The one before, Carol Hawkins had picked Darla out of seven names to give her grandfather’s vintage shaving kit. It was a beautiful folding straight-razor with an ivory handle and matching brush. That one had burned Phoebe as much as the flask. But the resentment had faded when Carol was found dead in her apartment. She’d had a heart-attack soon after giving away the shaving kit.

Poor Carol, Phoebe thought but then smiled at the prospect of seeing Gerald soon. A doctor and a widower, Gerald McBeth had been the talk of the community when he showed up. It was hard to believe he was in his seventies when he could have passed for sixty—easy. All the single ladies, and some of the married ones had swooned when he strolled into that pig-pickin’ the Bridge

Club held. But it was Phoebe that landed him and now she was headed on her third date with him. There had been some bitterness from the other women, and especially from Darla, when Phoebe won the Gerald sweepstakes. She was excited because she didn't know where they were going. She only knew that he said to "be ready for an adventure."

She stood in the bathroom and fixed her hair. Her shoulder length waves were whiter than blond now, but they'd make Barbara Mandrell proud, Phoebe thought. She gazed through her glasses and liked the look. The rounded square frames hid the bulging thickness of the lenses. "No more coke bottles, Warren," she said to her reflection. It's what Warren used to call them—God rest his soul. She thought her late husband wouldn't be offended that she started dating again, it had been eleven years after all. He'd just want her to be happy—and safe. She looked down at the top of her vanity and pulled open the heavy drawer. There sat Warren's Colt .45. "It's loaded like you taught me," she said. The doorbell rang and she quickly shut the drawer. She glanced one more time in the mirror and headed to the door.

## II

Gerald had picked the perfect spot; Phoebe's favorite place—Stone Cedar Park. He led her through the pine forest to a secluded picnic table in a small clearing surrounded by white dogwoods. It was surprising that the table was empty on such a beautiful spring

day, but Phoebe guessed that was one of the perks of being able to go out on a Wednesday.

“This is beautiful, I hadn’t seen this spot with the trees in full bloom like this,” Phoebe said.

“*Cornus florida*,” Gerald said.

“What’s that?”

“It’s the Latin name for these dogwoods. I like them much better than the late flowering *Cornus kousa* that the town planted up by the fire station. The *florida* is native to the area, the *kousa* isn’t.”

“I didn’t know you were so knowledgeable about trees!” Phoebe scanned the trees, looking at them closer than she ever had before.

He shrugged. “It’s a hobby. I’ve been learning about the local flora since I moved here.” He placed the picnic basket on the table and opened it. “I thought we’d have a picnic. I brought some pulled pork from Roscoe’s.”

Phoebe smiled. She thought she’d smelled Roscoe’s in the car, and she was happy that was what Gerald had in the picnic basket. “I wish I’d known, I would have brought some of my sweet tea.”

Gerald looked at her briefly and winked. “Don’t worry about that, Roscoe helped me out there too.” He pulled two glasses from the picnic basket and then a mason jar filled with a light brown liquid.

“You think you can handle Roscoe’s sweet tea?”

“I’ll be alright,” Gerald said before pouring the liquid into the glasses.

It stung Phoebe's nostrils a bit before the mellow smell of tea wafted in. They clinked glasses and sipped. It burned a bit before settling in Phoebe's stomach, but Gerald coughed before putting his hand to his mouth. "I guess moonshine is something I'm still getting used to," he said.

Phoebe laughed. They talked and enjoyed the barbeque while sipping on the fortified tea. Gerald talked about how glad he was to find someone so adventurous in the community. "I didn't know what to expect when I moved here. I was worried I'd be surrounded by people who thought living was only for the young."

"Are you sayin' we're old?" Phoebe said before she shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself. "That spring wind still has a chill."

The corners of Gerald's mouth rose into a wry smile, and he stepped around the table before sitting next to Phoebe. He wrapped his arm around her, and she leaned into him, smelling his aftershave—cedar, she thought. Phoebe liked his smell. It was distinct and pleasant.

"We're as young as we feel," he said.

"I appreciate this more than you know, Gerald." Phoebe shook her head in a mild frustration. "I just wish I'd be able to give you the gift I found for you."

"Gift?"

"Yes. I found the perfect flask for you on my Facebook group, but it went to someone else. I thought you'd love it. But that dang Darla snagged it before I could. I'm real sorry."

Gerald rubbed her shoulder. “That’s kind of you, Phoebe, but you don’t need to give me anything. Just spending time with you is more than I could ask for.”

She looked at him and locked eyes. He leaned in to kiss her and she tasted the sweet tea. It was wonderful but all she could think about was how she needed to get back at Darla.

### III

Phoebe awoke before her alarm at six. She felt rested and as energized as she’d been in a long time. Gerald had dropped her off early the day before. He said he had some errands to take care of, but would love to see her again that weekend. The thought of another date with him lifted her mood. She walked to the kitchen to start the coffee maker, and she picked up her phone where she left it charging. She had a missed call and a text from Evelyn that morning.

Evelyn: Call me ASAP

Phoebe let the coffee maker finish and poured into her coffee mug that read “My Coffee’s Leaded Like My Colt .45.” She took a sip and leaned against the counter. The sun filtered through the blinds, and it looked like a peaceful morning outside. She took her phone off the counter and unplugged the charger before calling Evelyn back.

“Phoebe,” Evelyn said excitedly. “What took you so long?”

“I needed my coffee. What’s going on?”

“Margaret is dead. They found her late last night.”

“Dead? What? What do you mean ‘they found her?’”

“Her daughter said she went over for supper last night and found her lying in the kitchen. Called nine-one-one and when they got there, they said it looked like a heart-attack.”

Phoebe’s stomach tightened like a fist at the thought of Margaret’s little girl finding her like that. She shook her head solemnly. “That’s awful.”

“I’ll say,” Evelyn said. “Heck of a coincidence too. She’d just gotten rid of that flask and then she up and dies. Just like Carol Hawkins.”

Phoebe shook her head. “It’s a shame. She’ll be missed.”

“You still want to do dinner today?” Evelyn said. “They’ve got two-for-one early bird over at Blue Ribbon.”

“Sounds good.”

They hung up and Phoebe paced around her kitchen. She thought about Carol and her daughter. She felt sad but something Evelyn had said wouldn’t stop tumbling in her head. What a weird coincidence. Two women give something away on the Buy Nothing group and both die soon after.

Phoebe pushed it aside and dressed for the day. She needed to get in her daily walk and deliberated over the outfit. It might’ve been spring, but the wind pushed it a full ten degrees cooler than the sixty-degree temperature would suggest. She finally decided on a fashionable windbreaker, the purple one she had received from the Buy Nothing group and headed out for her trip around her Three Ponds retirement community.

She walked at a brisk pace to keep her pulse up. She thought it was important to get the heart going in the morning—sort of like jump-starting an engine that had been idle for a while. It was a beautiful day, with the dogwoods in full bloom, stark white against a cerulean sky. Phoebe thought she'd give the town manager an earful when she saw him for putting in non-native trees at the fire station.

Her mind quickly shifted from flowering trees to the blue and red lights in front of Wilbur Messing's house. As she got closer, a stretcher emerged from the house with a body-bag on top. Evelyn was standing on the curb, still in her robe and slippers. She waved to Phoebe with a frown.

“Not Wilbur,” Phoebe said as she walked up. “What happened?”

Evelyn shook her head. “Management found him on their weekly. Guess he hadn't been out in a while.” She reached up to rub the tiny gold cross hanging from her neck. “They were sayin' he's been dead for a coupla' days at least.”

“Dang,” Phoebe said.

They both stood together in silence as they watched the EMTs finish loading Wilbur into the ambulance. When the truck pulled off, Phoebe started to walk away. “See you at dinner.”

“Can we make it lunch?” Evelyn asked. “I'm gettin' kinda hungry, and I can't let my blood sugar get too low with the Lyme disease and all.”

Phoebe walked back to her house, thinking about Wilbur. He was always quiet, but kind. Then she remembered something that

jolted her into a fit. Wilbur was in the Buy Nothing group, and he had just given away a set of golf clubs. Phoebe had wanted it, but so did Darla. And Darla won it. When she got back to her house, she looked out again and noticed the white puffy clouds had started to form some grey masses within. Looks like it'll rain later, she thought before stepping inside.

Throughout the morning, Phoebe nearly wore out the linoleum in her kitchen as she paced, waiting for the Sheriff's Office to open. She knew their hours said nine, but she gave them until nine-o-five to let Buck get settled before she called.

"Sheriff's Office," Buck Blalock answered. "What can I do for you, Phoebe?"

"Buck, I got something for you to check out."

He cleared his throat. "Phoebe, we talked about this. I can't investigate every time you think the garbage man is spying for the Governor."

Phoebe did her best to remain calm, and rational. "Buck, I told you I was sorry about all that. I even baked you some cookies. Remember?"

"I do. What is it, Phoebe?"

She explained to him how three people from the Buy Nothing group had recently died. And she made sure to let him know that it happened after they gave something away to Darla, but she didn't push that point; she'd let Sheriff Blalock come to his own determination that Darla was the culprit.

“So, you’re saying that people are dying in the retirement community and it’s probably little old Darla McCready killin’ them?”

“I guess I hadn’t thought Darla could be doin’ this, Buck. But now that you say it... It kinda makes sense. She must be poisoning them.”

There was a sigh on the other end. “Phoebe, that is not what I’m saying. I’m saying that as unfortunate as it is, older people die. From heart attacks. And there isn’t any call to investigate someone for winning someone else’s baseball bat.”

“Golf clubs,” Phoebe corrected him.

“Sorry, golf clubs.”

“Ok, fine. Then I’ll do the investigatin’ myself.”

“Phoebe, I—”

But Phoebe ended the call before letting Sheriff Blalock finish and immediately called Evelyn instead. “Evelyn, instead of goin’ out, how about you come here for lunch?”

## IV

Evelyn had changed out of her robe and slippers and walked into Phoebe’s house just before noon. She hadn’t tamed much of her frazzled hair and was still clutching the cross when she sat at Phoebe’s table.

“Biscuits,” Phoebe said as she put the plate down in between them. “Fresh out of the oven. Got some ham in the microwave if you want.”

“I don’t know how you can act so calm,” Evelyn said. “That’s three now by my count.”

“I know, but I’ve got a plan.”

Phoebe stood and disappeared into her bedroom before emerging with a baseball glove.

“How in heavens is that part of a plan?”

“I posted it on the Buy Nothing group about a couple of hours ago. When Darla comes to get it, we’ll be ready for her.”

Evelyn shook her head and kept rubbing her cross. She always was such a worry-wort, Phoebe thought.

“What makes you think Darla will want it? What makes you think she’ll win?” Evelyn asked.

Phoebe chuckled. “She already did! I just checked before you got here. She said she wanted it, and I told her it was hers. She must sit there scouring that page all day. I told her that she can come pick it up at four.”

Phoebe had chosen Warren’s old catcher’s mitt because it was the kind of thing Darla would want. She just knew it. The flask, the shave kit, the golf clubs—these were all the kinds of things Warren would have loved, and Darla must have been pining for her late husband. Loss can drive some women mad, Phoebe thought.

“And what are you going to do when she comes to pick it up? Just—”

Phoebe cut her off, “What are we going to do, you mean. You’ll be there, in the bedroom, and when you hear her up to somethin’ you’ll come out. She can’t take both of us.”

“Speak for yourself,” Evelyn said. “I’ve got the Lyme disease; I can’t do any fighting. You need to call the Sheriff.”

“We don’t need the Sheriff. Wait, I know!” She took out her phone.

“It’s great to hear from you, Phoebe,” Gerald answered.

“Likewise, Gerald. Look, I know we’re supposed to see each other this weekend, but can you come by today? At four-thirty? I need your help with something.”

“Four-thirty? I think so, any excuse to see you again.”

They hung up and Phoebe smiled at Evelyn. “See, we’ve got backup. You just come out as a show of force; you don’t have to do the fightin’.”

Evelyn shook her head. “I don’t know about this. Maybe we should change the name from the ‘Buy Nothing’ group to the ‘Die Nothing’ group cause it feels like you’re settin’ yourself up.”

“Oh, will you calm down. It’ll be fine.”



Phoebe and Evelyn sat in her living room watching out the window for Darla. The sky was grey as the clouds had settled in for a spring shower which had just started when the vintage white Lincoln pulled up into one of Phoebe’s reserved spots out front.

“She’s here,” Phoebe said. “You get into the bedroom and wait for my signal.”

Evelyn stood without saying anything and made her way to the bedroom. She partially closed the door and disappeared into the darkened room.

Phoebe opened the front door as Darla approached. Her shoulder-length hair was black. Obvious dye job, Phoebe thought. Darla held her purse over her shoulder and smiled as she approached.

“Better get in quick before the real rain starts comin’,” Phoebe said and stepped aside. As Darla strode past her, Phoebe smelled cedar. “Are you wearing a new perfume?” she asked as she guided her to the kitchen table.

“No, nothing new, just my White Diamonds, but I didn’t put it on today.”

Phoebe nodded. “Right, ok.”

“So, do you have the glove?” Darla asked.

“On the table. Why don’t we sit a minute. We haven’t talked in so long. You want some coffee?”

“No, thank you. But how about some hot water? I’ve got some tea from the farmers’ market I want to try.”

“Let me just put the kettle on.” Phoebe stepped into the kitchen and filled her copper tea kettle and put it on the stove. “Who’s the tea from? Virgil?”

“You know, I don’t right remember, I guess it might have been.”

Phoebe pulled a white mug from her cupboard and then rinsed her coffee mug. She placed them on the table.

“Would you like to try some too?” Darla asked.

“Why not?” Phoebe responded.

The kettle screamed alive, and she returned to the kitchen to retrieve it. When she came back, she saw that Darla had put a teabag in each of their mugs and she poured the water and Phoebe sat across from her.

“It’s a dern shame about the group,” Phoebe said. “So many of our members dyin’ and all.” She watched Darla’s face, looking for any tell. But she saw genuine sadness enter her eyes. She’s a good actor, Phoebe thought.

“I know, it is such a sad thing when one of our friends passes.”

Phoebe nodded. “I’ll say. But it’s even sadder when you have a hand in helpin’ them pass, ain’t it?”

Darla started to nod in agreement but then shock entered her face a second later. “Helping them pass? What do you mean by that?”

Phoebe stood quickly and looked down at Darla. “The game is up, honey, we know all about it,” she said, loud enough to signal Evelyn.

“Wait, what? What do you know all about? Who’s we?”

Phoebe let out a quick chuckle. “Don’t play dumb, Evelyn and I know you’re the one killin’ the folks from the group. What, you think you could get away with it? Knock us off to get all our precious items?” Still no Evelyn. Dang, Phoebe thought, did the Lyme hurt her hearing too?

Darla started sobbing and Phoebe was expecting the confession any moment. Except it didn’t come.

“Phoebe, please, I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Just then, there was a knock at the door. “Wait here, Darla.”

Phoebe walked to the door and opened it to find Gerald on the other side. He was soaking wet as the rain had really started pouring.

“What was the help you needed?” he said as he stepped inside. He turned when he must have seen Darla. “What is going on?”

“I caught her,” Phoebe said. “Darla has been killing the members of the Buy Nothing group. She was going to do me next, but—”

Darla let out a loud sob. “No! I haven’t done anything of the sort! Gerry, tell her?”

Phoebe’s heart raced and she looked at Gerald. “Gerry? What is she talking about?”

His face contorted into a wicked smile. The face that had seemed so comforting on their date, had transformed into one of menace. “Is this the baseball glove, Phoebe?” he said as he walked to the table and picked it up. “You were right, Darla, I do like it.”

“I knew I smelled your aftershave on her!” Phoebe said. “You were two-timing me, Gerald? For what? Some golf clubs?”

“Just sit down,” Gerald said. He stepped next to Darla who sat with her head hanging low. He placed his hand on her shoulder. “Do you have any idea how much some of these things go for? You all just give them away to each other, but we are talking thousands of dollars. Like that flask. I should have waited for you to just give it to me, seeing as it was the only item worth taking in that place.”

Phoebe sat and looked up at Gerald. He was still smiling, and it made her stomach turn. “How could you do this, Darla? How could you do this to your friends?”

Darla shook her head and continued to cry. “He made me. Said that I was already an accessory. It was the only way we could be together.”

Gerald’s hand flexed as he squeezed Darla’s shoulder tighter, and she let out a pained sob before quieting. He let go and stepped toward Phoebe, removing something from his pocket. “Since you wouldn’t be a good girl and drink your tea, we must do it the hard way.” He leaned down and lifted his arm with a syringe in his hand. “Heart attacks are so easy to induce in the elderly.”

Phoebe recoiled, not knowing what to do. He was leaning closer and suddenly there was a loud BANG! They all turned to the bedroom door where Evelyn stood holding Warren’s Colt .45 pointed at the ceiling.

Just then, the door flung open, and Sheriff Blalock was standing there. “Freeze!” he shouted. “Drop the weapon!”

There was a loud clang as Evelyn dropped the gun to the floor, but Blalock’s gun was pointed at Gerald. “I said drop it!” Gerald dropped the syringe, and it clattered to the floor.

## ————— VI —————

After Blalock had loaded Gerald and Darla into the Sheriff’s cars, he came back inside to sit with Phoebe. Evelyn had gone home to rest after getting cleared. Apparently, she had to go to the

bathroom when Phoebe was expecting her to intervene, and when she pulled open the drawer—she claimed she wasn't snooping—she found the revolver and took it for insurance.

“So, you ended up believing me after all?” Phoebe said.

Buck sighed and leaned back in the kitchen chair. He twirled an unlit cigar in his fingers. “Tests came back from Carol Hawkins and the lab flagged an abnormality. Apparently, she had a potent level of *Convallaria majalis* in her system. I came here to make sure you didn't do anything rash, but then I heard the gunshot.”

“Conva...what?”

“That's the Latin name for Lily of the Valley. You know, the little white flower?”

“And it's poisonous?” Phoebe asked.

“That's what they tell me. It can cause heart irregularities. And those— “

“Like heart attacks!” Phoebe said.

Blalock nodded. “Yes, apparently in older folks, it can.”

“So that needle was filled with that stuff?”

“Probably, but we'll test it. And that tea she brought, that was probably the same stuff too. It's a good thing you didn't drink it.”

Phoebe's heart skipped a beat. “That's right, I knew something was off.” She didn't mention that the only reason she didn't was because it was too hot. “So, what'll happen to them?”

“Well, Darla was already singing a tune in the car, saying it was all his plan. She was only helping because she was coerced. Said that he told her the tea would just put them to sleep and he could take a few things without them noticing. But by the time she

figured it out, she had no choice but to keep helping him. If she cooperates, she might have a chance at getting out at some point. But, for Gerald, things aren't looking good for him. You know he was a doctor up in Pennsylvania before coming here? Had to resign in disgrace after more than the normal number of his elderly patients died under his care. They gave him a nickname—'Doctor McDeath'."

"I knew there was somethin' off about him," she said. "Thanks, Buck. I'm glad we could work together on this one."



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