

PHEBE'S WAR

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A Revolutionary War Tale

Phebe's War

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*I dedicate this book with love to Kimberly Ann,
Curtis Van Wyck, and Tillie Terese. I pray my children
share this story with theirs.*

CHAPTER ONE

*P*HEBE LAY IN bed under the weight of her blankets and quilts. The last remnants of sleep delayed the inevitable. Cold air tickled her nose and face as it made its way through the gaps and chinks in the roof's shingles and clapboard walls. The sun's light filtered through the trees and her window, but its warmth did not. She had gone to bed warm.

The Brinckerhoff household celebrated the prior night. Phebe's father's homecoming and her brother's pending wedding brought the light of fireplaces that burned into the evening. Guests brought their own warmth. The wind had blown hard in the night; the pleasant days of early autumn left in a forced march. The oaks, elms, chestnuts, and maples surrendered the last of their leaves. It was only October, and Phebe had difficulty getting out of bed. She knew that if she waited long enough, the servants would have the kitchen fire going, and she could wash up and get dressed in its rising heat. When she was little, she would wake up, bound out of bed, and run downstairs to help with the fire and breakfast. Now at ten years old, her energetic enthusiasm for cold mornings had waned; she did not recall being so sensitive to the cold before. "What will I do when January comes?" she wondered aloud.

Tiptoeing out of bed, the floor cold on her bare feet, she clutched her doll to her chest. Then, she set it carefully on her dresser in a seated position with its back against the mirror. "Good morning, Buttons."

Buttons was named Buttons simply because her eyes were buttons. It was a name that came to Phebe on her own when she was old enough to know what buttons were and how to say the word. Marie, her stepmother, would imitate how Phebe said it when she was less than two years old. The name sounded something like, *Budns*. Phebe's real Mam had made the doll out of leftover fabric, linen, wool, yarn, and, of course, two matching buttons. She died though, Phebe's real Mam, before Phebe could form a lasting impression of her. One of the sapphire colored buttons fell off when Phebe was about six. Marie replaced it with as close a match as she could, a dark, slightly smaller, cobalt one. Marie became, in effect, her mother, and the line between stepmother and mother blurred.

Her toes were now getting ice cold. She gasped and jammed her feet into her stockings and flew down the stairs, her left-hand brushing along the horsehair plaster. From the center hallway she ran off to the kitchen to find her brother, Jacob.

He had dressed for church in his pants and vest and was seated at the table for breakfast. He brightened as she crashed through the door and nodded hello to his sister while his mouth was full, smiling through sealed lips. Despite his Sunday clothes, he remained casually disheveled. Phebe noticed the spilled porridge on his vest. She laughed aloud when she saw his wig, slightly off-center, askew in a way that hooded his left eye in shadow. She knew he wouldn't pass Mam's inspection, and that there would be a big fuss to provide more polish and powder to his presentation before he could leave the house for his own wedding. In the ten of his twenty years she had witnessed, she had never seen him get set astir about anything.

“Trouble getting out of bed again, *Susje*?” He used the Dutch word for sister as a pet name in his persistent, habitual teasing and finally swallowed his mouthful.

“A little,” she blushed. She pulled a chair out and plopped down next to him in one seamless movement that only a ten-year-old could manage.

“Josephine made breakfast already. I left you some warm porridge.” He picked up the cast iron pot from the hearth and dished out a trencher full. She pushed her blonde hair out of her eyes and cupped the warm dish in her hands to draw as much heat as she could before she shoved a spoon into it. The porridge was sweetened with maple syrup. “Here are some eggs and jerked venison,” he said. He served the rest of breakfast and sat beside her at the table.

They sat in silence for a moment as she spooned the food into her mouth. “Are you nervous?” she asked, through a second helping of eggs.

“About what?” He sat back in his chair, leaned it back on two legs and put his hands behind his head. He moved to put his feet on the table, glanced around the kitchen and thought better of it with Josephine nearby. She was distracted by her work, but her distraction would end the moment he put a foot anywhere near the tabletop.

“About the wedding, what else?” her voice rose, piqued by his smugness.

“No, why should I be? People get married all the time.” He moved his chair back onto all four of its legs after he caught a disapproving look from the cook.

“You don’t get married every day!” Her gaze was stuck on the porridge on his vest.

Perhaps he was right to be unruffled. He had known Diente since she was born. He had known her family his whole life. Her mother was born a Brinckerhoff and they were distant

cousins. Their community existed in proximity and close cooperation. "Diente," or Catherine Van Wyck, had sat in the second pew at church since she was a girl. Their parents had been talking about this marriage for an age. Their marriage had seemed inevitable. Diente pleased him with her grace and appearance. Anxiety never occurred to him, nor did he question the decreed nuptials. He took it in stride.

"Our marriage has been planned for a long time. We are a great match. I don't see why I should be nervous." He followed Phebe's gaze to his chest and finally noticed the porridge stain, picked up a napkin, wet it, and went to work wiping it away. The smudge faded, but he had left a large wet spot. Phebe continued to stare at it, shaking her head in mock disapproval. Despite their age difference, or maybe because of it, this good-natured ribbing was common between the sister and brother. It finally occurred to him to ask, "Are you nervous?"

"No!" she blurted, convinced that she spoke the truth because she was not nervous about the wedding itself. She was scared, maybe worried. She worried that she would hardly ever see him anymore. He would move closer to town. He would start his own farm and his own family. She would no longer wake to him in the house. "I don't know. Maybe. Will you be different once you're married?"

"I don't think so." He had not thought about it. He pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. He sat forward now with his hands on his knees as if ready to stand. He did not know the answer to her question. Getting married did not seem like the issue. He looked forward to it. He had to leave home, though. Perhaps that was the hardest part. There was no room for him here, now of age, as the second son. "I'll still be your older brother."

"Will we still have breakfast together?"

"Of course! As often as possible." He stood. It was getting late. He took his coat off the hook and put it on deliberately.

He buttoned it slowly. He paused and smiled at his sister. “You may even be an auntie soon!”

That prospect did excite her. But she also knew she would have to share her brother with his new family. She pushed her chair back, placed her utensils on the table, and stood. She looked up at him—tall, neatly dressed, smiling broadly and calmly before going forth to get married to their seventeen-year-old friend, neighbor, and distant relative. She considered the couple’s age difference, which prompted the question, “Does that mean I have to marry Theodorus?” Theodorus was Diente’s thirteen-year-old brother.

“You don’t have to marry anyone.”

Marie, Phebe’s stepmother, walked through the kitchen door. She wore a new dress she had bought in town the month before. Her hair was up, pinned behind her head and shiny in the light. It caught Phebe’s attention because it was not covered in its customary white snood. Marie smelled of sweet perfume. “Phebe, you are not dressed!”

“Sorry, Mam. I was just eating breakfast. Where is Pa?” She tried to change the subject.

“He’s getting dressed, as should you!”

She went back upstairs, threw open the door to her armoire, and pulled out her new Sunday dress, admiring its colors and lace hem. She plunged her nose into it. It had just been washed and smelled of fresh air and soap. It had frills on the shoulder and splayed out at the waist down to her calves. It was colored in light blue and white. She pulled it on over her undergarments with uncharacteristic deliberation. It was more delicate than her other clothes, and she remembered ripping her last Sunday dress. “I can’t do that again. Mam will kill me.” But she could not sustain a high level of conscious awareness of the clothes she wore for very long. She tried her best to keep them clean and intact, but her clothes seemed to

have a mind of their own. They were attracted to dirt like a magnet to iron. If there was soot in a room, her clothes had a way of finding it. She loved the dress and liked the way it looked in the mirror. Her stepmother had gone against the boycott and all her patriotic beliefs, splurging on this imported English dress. "They can't begrudge a little girl's dress for her brother's wedding," she justified. The pressure to keep it clean caused her so much anxiety, however, she enjoyed wearing it for only a minute.

The Dutch Reformed Church in Fishkill was a two-mile journey. The family milled around the homestead's foyer as the time approached to make the trip. Jean-Pierre, servant and Sunday footman, led the horse and the phaeton around the oval path and stopped it at the old millstone near the stairs and waited for Phebe's parents to descend the front steps of the porch. Dirck and Jean-Pierre guided Marie to the stone and assisted her as she made the transition from the stone to the carriage. Phebe knew the phaeton made her mother nervous, but Pa was oblivious to that. Mam sat unusually high due to its four large wheels suspended with oversize leaf springs. She settled into the soft, upholstered seat, and held the side rail with one hand. Dirck stepped around to the right side of it and alighted in one quick motion. Jean-Pierre handed him the reins and stepped away from the carriage. Dirck flicked the reins, and the horse cantered off with a head snapping jerk as the Marie waved with her free hand.

"Make sure she stays out of the mud and keeps that dress clean. A girl must be presentable," their stepmother shouted over her shoulder.

"Yes, Mam, I will take care of her," answered Jacob, as the carriage sprung off. Mam and Pa would arrive early and spend their time chatting with neighbors and relatives.

Jean-Pierre had hitched the wagon to an ox, and he waited

for them outside of the barn. The wagon, though more practical than the phaeton, was much slower, and it took the bumps harder as well. It was roughly made with large wheels, a leaf spring under the seat, and it could carry twenty bushels in the back.

They rumbled past the Trinity church across the road, the wheels crunching the newly fallen leaves. They passed the Seminary and farms of neighbors and tenants. Most homes were two room stone houses with single slant roofs much like her great grandfather built when he bought his two thousand acres from Madam Brett in 1716. The late harvest corn remained in the fields. Stonewalls of granite and split rail fences separated the fields and property. The road followed the course of the Vis Kil, a tributary to the Hudson that powered the family mill. The homes got closer together, and the church rose into sight in town at a crossroad. She sat quietly and considered these were her last moments with an unmarried brother. She stared out in a daydream, happy to avoid conversation.

As they arrived, a crowd of people gathered outside of the church. The Van Wyck clan dressed in their finest. Major Richard Van Wyck, uncle of the bride, stood there with his children Catherine, Theodorus, Hanna, and Cornelius Richard, Jacob's contemporary. Diente's family gathered near the door: her mother, Aeltie, whose maiden name was Brinckerhoff, and her sons, Isaac and Theodorus. The judge, also a Theodorus Van Wyck, had arrived. Phebe's father's brother, Uncle John, and his father, Great Uncle John chatted with her Pa. Though this may seem confusing to the uninitiated, Phebe had it well in hand. The ladies, resplendent in imported English and French dresses, boycott be darned, circulated about, excited about the wedding to come. Many stepped toward the wagon to welcome the groom. Phebe delighted in the attention that spilled over to her. She hopped down from the

wagon in one jump, her knees bent deeply as she hit the ground, but she kept her balance. She collected herself, then curtsied for the crowd.

“That is a lovely dress, dear. You look as beautiful as a flower,” beamed Barbara Van Wyck, Richard’s wife.

“The bride will have nothing on you!” her husband chimed. They crowded into the small church and sat in the front pew, and the Mass began. Pastor Dominie Rysdick presided, and though Phebe understood Dutch, it did not sustain her attention. She began to daydream. She studied the familiar walls and ceiling. She gazed at the stone and mortar pattern she saw every Sunday. It was a squat church made of walls three feet thick, built by her Dutch forebears. It had two rows of arched windows. It was shaped as an oblong square, with a square tower attached to the eastern extremity. From the top rose a modest steeple. The entrance, on the south side, faced the road that led from the town to the river. The church was built to be as much a fortress to defend against the native population as a church.

Her grandfather, Abraham Brinckerhoff, had helped build the church, but why he thought they would ever have to fight the Indians was a mystery to her. She began to daydream about what life was like when her grandfather arrived in the county. The landscape was almost untouched by Europeans. Her father told stories of the local Wappinger tribe. The white settlers bought the land from the tribe, and there was never any real hostility between the natives and the settlers. Her father grew up close to them, shared the land, and was friendly with the chief. The tribe taught them farming techniques, how to harvest sap from maple trees, tracking, and foraging. They traded goods freely. It seemed silly to have such a dark, foreboding fortress of a church designed as it was to both invite some and repel others.

She had always sat in the front pew. Today was different, though. She sat next to her brother, and he and Diente were the center of attention. Was she able to keep her dress clean? Did her hair still have a curl? Was Theodorus looking at her? He was handsome enough. As a boy of the Van Wyck family close to her age, she reconsidered the possibility that her family was plotting to have them marry someday. She flushed red at the thought as she looked down at her feet. "I am never getting married!" she almost said aloud.

At the end of the ceremony, Jacob took Diente's hand, and they walked together to the back of the church. They remained there, no longer just betrothed, but two people made one before God. Guests filed through the door and congratulated them one and two at a time. The congregants spilled into the churchyard where some of the members had prepared a picnic on some rough tables. Younger children played tag. Adults chatted and laughed. Midday turned to late afternoon, and the sun began to settle over the North River, six miles to the west. The party slowly ended as families dispersed. The women and children headed home, most of them need only walk a short way to the 50 or so houses that made up their town of Fishkill. The men, though, were not finished. They left in small groups and headed to Jacob Griffin's tavern, The Rendezvous.

CHAPTER TWO

THE RENDEZVOUS WAS little more than a small house, where the main floor provided the hospitality. From the wood floor to the windowsills, the wall was dark stained wainscot, matching the trim around the windows. The remainder of the walls and ceiling, once whitewashed plaster, now had a patina of grey from years of pipe smoke. Seating quickly became scarce as the men arrived and began to relax in the warm firelight.

“Congratulations,” Richard clapped Jacob on the shoulder.

“I couldn’t have given my niece’s hand to a more worthy suitor.” Richard had walked Diente down the aisle in his deceased brother’s place.

“Thank you, Uncle Richard. But really, did you ever have a choice?” The gathering laughed.

“I like to think so, but perhaps not. Dirck, teach your son some manners.”

“He is incorrigible.” Dirck lamented.

“I bet Pa is happy to get rid of him.” Abraham added.

“Hey, easy there, brother. You are just jealous that I get to get out of the house.”

“Yes, being the first born has it’s disadvantages.” Abraham looked at his father, who shook his head, laughing.

“Yes, some disadvantage. One of the most productive mills in the patent. I would like that disadvantage.” Richard said snidely. “How much land are you giving my new nephew-in-law?”

“Don’t worry, Uncle, Pa has taken good care of me. Mind you, he gave me a tract as far away from his home as he could find.”

“Now, now, son, it also happens to be the most fertile land.”

“Farming...milling. Hmm.” Jacob held his left and right hand out as if each option had tangible weight.

“At least it is honest work. You can never completely trust a miller.” Richard ribbed the elder Brinckerhoffs.

Jacob Griffin, the innkeeper, spun out of the kitchen at this opportune moment, before the banter deteriorated. He was proud to serve up some of the Hudson Valley’s best on this propitious occasion: roasted turkey with currant sauce, warm buttered corn, baked beans, wheat bread, tangy apple cider, beer, and wine. Griffin’s fare was the best available; that is, under the circumstances. He put the food out to each table, then poured the wine around the tables.

“I can live without the tea, but I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to this foxy wine,” Richard referred to the musky flavor of the colony’s local wine. Richard had as much of a reason as anyone in the room to join the boycott. He recalled his service with the British military with bitterness. He had served with them in the French and Indian War. He marched upon the enemy in the west, far away from his wife, Barbara, and his young children. His farm suffered with lower production and less income from his absence. He went into debt in his final year of duty, while he suffered through another cold winter away from home. Though a major at the time, as a colonist, he was still treated as a second-class soldier. While serving far from home, a separate detachment of the king’s army traveled up King’s Highway and foraged Richard’s land.

They helped themselves to his crops, hay, pigs, and cattle.

They drained his barrels of beer and cleaned out his canned goods. They removed the tapers, leaving his family in the dark. Barbara pleaded with them, insisting that her husband presently served their army in the west. They either did not believe her or chose not to. His wife and young children were forced to evacuate to Fishkill Landing on the river.

“It looks as if you’ll have no choice for a while,” replied his brother, Judge Theodorus. He was enjoying his beans and did not want to hear his brother’s habitual vitriol.

“I realize this. I just wish they’d get off our backsides and let us go back to normal business. It is so disruptive. It seems we are all losing.” All in the room understood Richard’s frustration. The Stamp Tax, the Tea Tax, the Quartering Act, the control over the colony’s timber, building, international trade: It was suffocating them, and they saw no way out of the noose England was slowly tightening around their collective, commercial necks.

“I have to agree,” chimed the innkeeper, while bringing out another round of cider. He was a jolly fellow; he had a permanent smile on his face. He wore an apron over his clothes. It was stained with bright colors of fruit and white flour as it stretched to fit over his round belly. He enjoyed having his tavern filled with friends who were also paying customers—and his own cooking. “I lose a fortune every time I have to quarter English troops. They demand the wood, candles, vinegar, and beer. Beer! Five pints of it, like it’s their God given right! It has become so dear, lately, too.” He trailed off as he skirted back to the kitchen.

The more cider and wine consumed, as one might expect, the louder and more animated the conversation became. Most of the crowd was Dutch, and though their ancestors had sworn allegiance to the Crown when England took over the colony a century earlier, none of them possessed any love for the current British king.

“Why must they keep a standing army here? We won the war; the French don’t threaten the frontier. They should take their soldiers home,” Richard went on a half hour later. He was clearly getting sourer the more he drank.

“They need us to pay for the war. They see themselves as our protectors. Besides, nobody would abide by their new taxes if there were not a standing army to enforce them. We shouldn’t complain. Boston’s got the worst of it with the closed port and an imposed governor,” Dirck lectured. He had only recently returned from the New York Provincial Assembly where he served as a representative.

“They were in for it with that tea business,” Richard referred to the mob that had dumped the English tea into the Boston Harbor the year prior.

“I’m just glad most of the army is up there and not at my doorstep,” chimed the innkeeper, who had caught up on his work for a while and sat down to join the party.

“The New York Sons of Liberty did the same to the *Nancy*,” Dirck referred to dumping of tea off a ship in Sandy Hook in March. “I fear the new restrictions in Boston may set a precedent for management of the rest of the colonies. I suspect New York and Philadelphia may be next for martial law.”

The judge asked Dirck what he thought the outcome of all this discord would bring. Dirck enjoyed some insight into the broader workings of colonial politics. The Boston Road bisected the Brinckerhoff homestead, and he often entertained travelers as they made their way through Dutchess county from Boston or the Hudson Valley, up the King’s Highway or from across the river at Fishkill Landing. He received much of his news first-hand from some of the colonies’ most notable men.

“The tension in Boston is high. The colonists feel quite aggrieved. At this point, I don’t think it would require much for hostilities to begin. They have thousands of British soldiers up

there. It's an occupation. There is a faction of rebellious men who would like nothing less than a civil war."

"That would be such a shame," the judge replied.

"Britain would be foolish to fight another war in the colonies. It took them seven years and our help to defeat the French. I don't think they could win a fight so far from their shores in this frontier against us," Richard contributed.

"But King George has more invested in us now, and he would rather keep control of us than have us become a rival. I don't think he would hesitate to protect his interests," Dirck said.

Richard's nephew, Isaac, asked, "What will that mean for us?"

"I don't know. With the army in Boston, we may be safe here. Though I imagine more traffic on the Boston Road, quartering and feeding British soldiers or the militia. I hope it doesn't come to war," Dirck answered.

The food and drink kept coming. The crowd became more boisterous. Talk of politics turned to song and carousing. The innkeeper brought out the hard liquor. "This is rye whiskey made right here in Dutchess County," he boasted as he poured glasses for his company.

"Local whiskey. Just another concession to the British," complained Richard again. The Rendezvous had boycotted imported whiskey to avoid the tax.

The whiskey met with varying levels of approval when the bottle came around to Isaac. He slurred, "No, thank you. I shwore and oath of temperments." He waved the glass off, draining his beer.

"Temperance," Dirck corrected to the laughter of the men and took another draught.