

PRAISE FOR *THE CUMBERLAND BRIDE*

“Gut-wrenching emotion with all the action of *The Last of the Mohicans*. *The Cumberland Bride* will grab you by the throat and not let go until you’ve closed the book. A hearty round of applause for Shannon McNear’s debut novel. This is one up-and-coming author that you’re going to want to keep your eye on!”

—Michelle Griep, award-winning author of *The Captured Bride*

“Take an exciting journey through the Cumberland Gap in the late 18th century with the talented Shannon McNear’s well-developed characters. You won’t be disappointed!”

—Carrie Fancett Pagels, award-winning, ECPA-bestselling author
of *My Heart Belongs on Mackinac Island*

“Filled with unforgettable characters and a dash of romance, Shannon McNear’s *The Cumberland Bride* is an adventure from the first page to the last. Just when I thought I knew what would happen next, McNear surprised me. I fell in love with this book, and I know you will too.”

—Kathleen Y’Barbo, bestselling author of
My Heart Belongs in Galveston, Texas and *The Pirate Bride*

“Breathtaking and captivating! *The Cumberland Bride* has everything I look for in a good book—great characters, a swoon-worthy hero, edge-of-your-seat adventure, and a romance that truly touched my heart. The author’s in-depth research and historical descriptions swept me back to the early American frontier with all its romance and dangerous beauty. Rarely does a book keep me up at night, and rarely do I think about the story long after I turned the last page. Don’t miss this one!”

—MaryLu Tyndall, author of the bestselling and
award-winning Legacy of the King’s Pirates series

“Shannon McNear writes vivid, richly-detailed historical novels with plenty of heart and adventure. Highly recommended!”

–Elizabeth Camden, RITA and Christy award-winning author

“Shannon McNear’s *The Cumberland Bride* is a beautifully written novel with a compelling plot of brave travelers on the Wilderness Road. In wonderful lyrical prose, McNear deftly handles the building romantic tension between Kate and Thomas while weaving a fascinating tale chronicling the historical hardships between the Native American people and the waves of European settlers flowing into their land in the late 1700s. This can’t-miss tale will capture your mind and thrill your heart!”

–Jennifer Uhlarik, Selah award-winning author of *The Outcast’s Redemption*, a part of *The Secret Admirer Romance Collection*

“A fabulous read! *The Cumberland Bride* is gorgeously-written and rich in historical detail, with a romance that hooked me from the start. This one is definitely for the keeper shelf.”

–Susanne Dietze, award-winning author of
My Heart Belongs in Ruby City, Idaho

“Rooted firmly in time and place with rich historical details and a vivid storyworld, *The Cumberland Bride* is a beautiful tale of hope, redemption, and true love. A must-read debut novel for those who love Laura Frantz and Lori Benton.”

–Gabrielle Meyer, author of *Love’s Undoing* in *The Backcountry Brides Romance Collection*

“Compelling and lovely, *The Cumberland Bride* will take you on a journey of the heart as you travel with the characters into the wilderness.”

–Roseanna M. White, bestselling author of *The Lost Heiress* and the
Shadows Over England Series

*The
Cumberland
Bride*



SHANNON
MCNEAR

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DEDICATION

For my mothers and fathers who walked this road
before me, and for my children, who will walk it after.

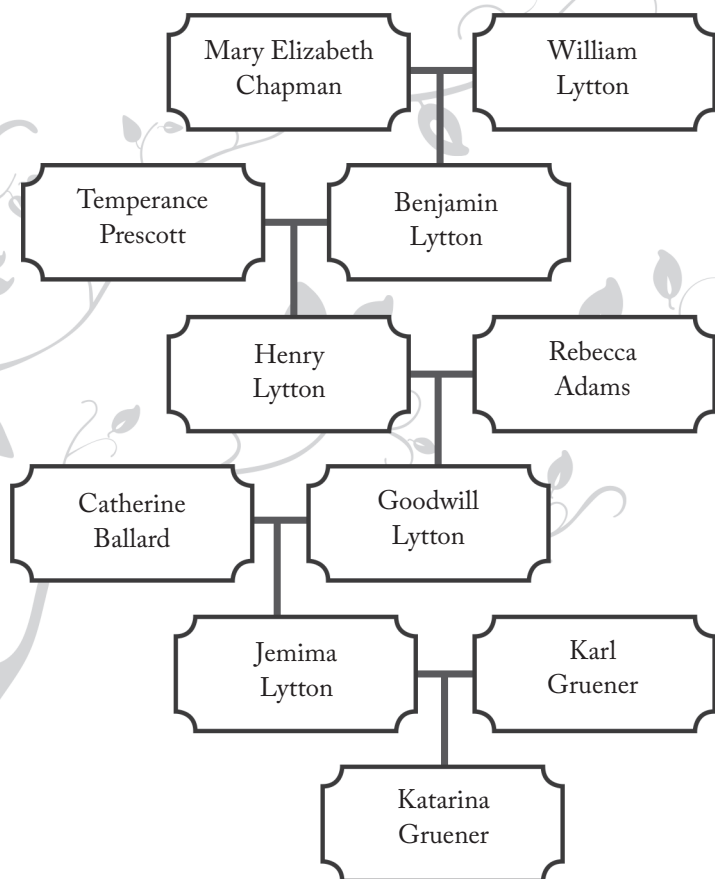
*Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest;
and how can we know the way?*

—John 14:5

Wishikatowi!

(“be strong” in the Shawnee tongue)

Daughters of the Mayflower



The Lytton Family

William Lytton married Mary Elizabeth Chapman (Plymouth 1621)

Parents of 13 children, including Benjamin

Benjamin Lytton married Temperance Prescott (Massachusetts 1668)

Born to Benjamin and Temperance

Henry Lytton married Rebecca Adams (New York 1712)


Children were Goodwill and Amity

Goodwill married Catherine Ballard (New York 1737)

Born to Goodwill and Catherine

Jemima Lytton who married Karl Gruener (New Jersey 1777)

Children included Katarina



CHAPTER I

Tennessee, Spring 1794
Bean's Station

My father used to tell the story," Kate murmured as she wrote, quill scratching against the page, "of how he and his fellow Hessians sailed down the Hudson with the British, preparing to attack Washington and his forces. When they came under fire, he and the other men of good, devout German stock, broke out singing hymns, believing God would preserve them. Colonel Rawdon commenced to mocking them for such simple faith. And that was the beginning of the end of my father's faith in the British."

Kate sat back from the page with its drying ink and gazed out the open window of her narrow attic room. Noonday sun spilled across the busy settlement and rolling forest beyond, still waiting for the green of spring. A tendril of breeze touched her cheek, and she reached to catch the sheet of paper just before it lifted from the bedside table.

She loved this story. It deserved to be told, how the wicked Colonel Rawdon cut his own hamstrings, so to speak, with his disdain of the Hessians' faith in such a time. But her father had forbidden sharing it outside the immediate family, even with those considered dear friends. Things were difficult enough in this new country, he insisted, without folk knowing he'd once fought on behalf of the enemy. And so, out of love for her dear papa, she'd held her silence.

She probably ought not commit such words even to paper. But the story burned within her, begged to be told.

And 'twas but one of many.

Ink and paper ought to be reserved for practical things, Papa maintained—keeping records, writing letters. Nothing as frivolous as storytelling, and personal journals were up for debate—but this, she told herself, was a form of record keeping. If a people lost their history, what was left them? Even the holy scripture devoted as much of its pages to histories as to psalmody and exhortation.

“Katarina Grace Gruener! Where are you?”

Oh bother! She thought she’d done enough of the morning’s chores to allow for stealing a half hour to write, but apparently not. “Coming, Mama!”

Kate hastily recapped the ink and wiped her quill, then slid the written sheet carefully beneath the blotter, pressed the top layer down, and tucked both in the side of her clothes chest. It should be safe there from discovery, at least for the present.

Skirts fisted in one hand, she ran down the narrow stairs of the cabin they rented while Papa surveyed for the Wilderness Road to the north. Mama stayed busy taking in washing and sewing—as if three of Kate’s younger siblings were not occupation enough. But Papa and Mama had agreed that Papa would save all of his wages that he could, and Mama would endeavor to keep the rest of them fed and clothed by her industry in this little town where the Wilderness Road dipped south from the Holston and Watauga Valleys before angling back north toward Cumberland Gap.

“Katarina!”

Kate burst into the morning room on the heels of her mother’s call. Jemima Lytton Gruener was a formidable woman, briskly efficient even when loving, and Kate dreaded her ire. “I’m here, Mama.”

Her mother’s features flattened into disapproval, her lips thinning. “How many times have I told you we haven’t the luxury of you sneaking away to read in the middle of the day?”

“I wasn’t—I’m sorry, Mama.” Kate held herself still and tried not to feel like a chastened infant still in leading strings—as Stefan currently was, playing with a pair of wooden spoons while tied securely to a table leg. He looked up with an adorably toothy grin and waved a spoon at her.

Mama nodded once and, reaching into the side of her skirts, pulled out a folded and sealed paper. "Very well then. I need you to carry this message to the tavern to be sent out with the next post rider, and see if anything has come from your papa. Wait if you must," she added, pressing the packet and needed coins into her hand. Kate swallowed her glee as she accepted the missive, but Mama's brown eyes were sharp. "Do *not* think this is reward for being slothful this past hour. Stay no longer than necessary."

She stepped outside to the blindingly bright day. The smell of lye stung her nostrils—Dulsey, their Negro freedwoman, and Betsy, Kate's younger sister, were hard at work washing linens in the small yard behind the cabin. Waving to them, and returning the smile she got from both, she hurried on, into the muddy path running behind their cabin and half a dozen others like it, down the hill to the tavern that served as the social center of Bean's Station.

Away from the house, she slowed her steps. The spring day was too beautiful not to savor. Clear blue skies, balmy breeze smelling of the land awakening from its long winter slumber. The hilltops beckoning, and the not-too-distant mountain—except that everyone was warned not to stray from the station itself. Not without an escort. A well-armed one.

Even so, a thread of longing whispered through her. Fear followed hard on its footsteps. What was she thinking? She'd likely not last an hour out there in the wild, forested hills.

The tavern loomed just ahead, a two-story structure of hewn timber that, like their cabin, hadn't had time yet to weather. Did any of the horses tied out front belong to the post rider?

She stepped lightly onto the porch and inside. Barely a hesitation in the rumble of conversation registered her presence as she paused, letting her eyes adjust to the dimness. The aromas of baking bread and tobacco smoke permeated the air.

Seeing no one she recognized besides the settlement folk, she made her way past the tables to the woman behind the counter. "Good day, Mistress Johnson. Has the post rider come yet? I've a packet for him."

A twinkle and a dimpled smile answered her, with the tilt of a head.

“Just in and over there, speaking with Nat Carrington.”

Kate swiveled to stare before she could stop herself. The Indian Affairs agent, here? Both men at the table looked rangy and trail worn—nothing terribly remarkable there, but appearances could be deceiving. She turned back to Mistress Johnson. “Is there trouble expected?”

The older woman’s dimples flashed again. “Always, sweetheart. But nothing more than usual.” She slid Kate a dripping mug. “Here, have some cider while you wait for them to finish talking.”



Thomas Bledsoe took a better grip on his ale and leaned an elbow on the table. “Sounds easy enough.”

Carrington’s eyes measured him for a long moment before he gave an approving nod. “Heard a lot of good things about you, Bledsoe. And your family’s a solid one. I’ve no doubt you’ll be an asset to our government’s efforts to make the frontier safe for our settlers.”

Feigning a long swallow, Thomas rolled the words around in his head. “You’ll pardon me, sir, but I hope I’m an asset to both the settlers and the Indians.”

The other man’s gaze flickered. “Of course.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Thomas went on, “just whose side are you on?”

Carrington lifted his mug, but not before Thomas saw the slight hardening of his face. “The right one.”

“Which is?”

Carrington didn’t answer. His gaze strayed past Thomas and he nodded again, slightly. “There’s a comely miss waiting to speak with you, looks like.”

Thomas’s shoulders were already prickling from having to sit with his back to most of the room. He twitched a glance behind him. The young woman who he’d seen come in a few minutes ago still stood by the counter, trying to look casual, but the frequent glance toward him and Carrington betrayed her unease.

“Dan’l Boone says the three things a man needs to make it on the

frontier are a good horse, a good gun, and a good wife.”

Thomas cupped both hands around his tankard, ignoring the sly smile that curved Carrington’s mouth. “Doing well enough with the first two, thank you.”

Carrington laughed softly. “Of course, no wife at all is better than a bad one. But ’tis something to think upon, for sure.” His eyes slid past Thomas and took on a gleam again.

To forestall further comment from Carrington, if nothing else—surely not out of his own interest—Thomas shoved back his chair and stood, then deliberately turned and walked toward the girl.

At his approach, the girl’s eyes widened and her face went a shade paler than she already was, but she drew herself up and clasped her hands primly before her. Thomas didn’t fail to notice the whitened knuckles. “Did you need aught, miss?”

She threw a panicked glance behind the counter, but Mistress Johnson had disappeared into the rear of the tavern. “I—I’m waiting for the post rider, sir. I’m told you are he?”

He gave a slight bow. “I am.”

One hand groped toward her pocket slit. “I have a message. May I give it to you now, or. . . ?”

“I reckon now is fine, miss.”

A blush stained her cheeks as she fumbled for the packet, and between the familiar annoyance at the girl’s nervousness and his habit of noting detail in every situation, Thomas found himself absently assessing her. Blue flowered gown over a red-striped petticoat, some signs of wear but not yet threadbare. Average height, perhaps a little more slender than some wished—but he was used to that, with his own sisters—rosy cheeks and fair hair peeking from her very proper cap. A cleft in her pert chin that someone would doubtlessly find charming.

But not him. And certainly not today.

Sandy lashes lifted to reveal coffee-brown eyes. Now there was a combination he’d not often seen.

She held out her hand, and after the sliver of a breath, he remembered to accept the packet and accompanying coins. He peered at the addressee,

then up at her again. “You’re relation to Karl Gruener?”

Startled from her missishness, she snapped to attention, instantly wary. “Yes. He’s my father.”

“I have something from him then. Just came from the survey camp.” He dug in the satchel still slung across his shoulders.

Blast her fluttering, anyway. This girl’s family was the one he’d just agreed to guide northward on the Wilderness Road.