

WINTER of BEAUTY



By Amy Hale Auker

A saddle built on a Will James tree hangs from the rafters of a garage and sways in the gloom, dancing with the dust motes. A pink arrowhead rests on a woman's dresser, and sometimes she touches it lightly as she passes by. A crystal decanter of scotch glows softly in the deserted study of a big house that once rattled loudly with love. An old cowboy turns the key in the ignition of an equally old truck, listens critically to the starter turn over, the engine roar to life as it does, once a week, as it has, once a week, for many years. Rain falls down and pools in a tinaja, a basin in the bedrock, a source of life in arid land, a place that captures and holds both magic and hope. Somewhere in a pawn shop, a drum set lies in pieces, dusty like the saddle, until someone sets it up and puts a yellow price tag on it. Bride Mountain unveils her face, sending her white cover rushing downward, baring her seeded breasts to the sun's insistent warmth. A couple makes love, and beauty is formed.

PART ONE : THE TINAJA

BRANDED

The padded booth in the dim restaurant swallowed Sunshine Angel Lewis and she held onto the table to keep from going under.

As a waitress with stick-straight hair took her drink order, Shiney silently cursed getting old, no longer limber enough to tuck one leg up under her ass to lift herself into a more dignified position.

And no, house scotch was not okay, not today.

In the interim between ordering Glenlivet and receiving her highball glass, Shiney regretted having chosen this fancy dining place instead of driving to the squat adobe house tucked into a dusty side street where a five-year-old piñata hung fading in the window and the Cinco de Mayo decorations stayed up all year. They didn't serve high-end scotch, but she liked Corona with lime just fine if it was cold enough. She'd have ordered the #7 platter: one enchilada, one chili relleno, and one beef taco, all swimming in beans and rice. Plus, since it was her birthday, if she had gone to *El Paisano* she would have substituted a stuffed relleno for the regular. Stuffed with shrimp. A garage sale painting of Madonna would have looked down on her as she ate.

She wrapped both hands around her glass. As it was still late afternoon rather than early evening, she was the only one in the dining room. The twelve-year-old waiter stumbled through his first recitation of the specials, but Shiney stopped listening after the veal, finally ordering baked roughly though only a fool expected good fish this far from the ocean. Ordering fish wasn't the only silly thing she'd done today. She pulled the new cell phone from her purse with two fingers. She'd have to get Monte to show her how the damned thing worked. The lady at the cell phone store had spoken fluent and rapid gibberish.

Shiney felt foolish as she ate her salad. She should have stayed at the ranch, worked at her desk in the office, kept to her normal routine. Lately she had been doing a lot of things that were out of the ordinary. Like using Google, damn her foreman's hide. And damn the satellite dish on the office roof. She wished she'd never typed "female midlife

crisis” into the little search box. Dangerous little box. Sunshine Angel Lewis had clicked out of the screen just as soon as she saw that there really was such an animal.

By the time the roughy arrived – too much food, smothered in white sauce, sprinkled with peas so green they looked plastic – Shiney wasn’t hungry. She put her fork down after three bites and sipped at the familiar scotch, peopling the rest of the table in her mind. They were all ghosts, but she sat them around her like jewels, invited them to join her for her party. She wondered who she could have invited that was alive. Well, Rafe, of course. And Monte.

Nothing was as it had been, and she wasn’t sure what she was moving toward. There were so many things she’d never done, and she was tired of doing the things she’d always done.

Sunshine Angel Lewis hit her thigh on the edge of the table rushing out of there. She drove toward Bride Mountain just as the sun began to sink. She raced to the only thing she’d ever known. Tonight of all nights, she couldn’t miss the sunset.

And so, sunset found her, this silver-haired lady, tough as leather on the outside, soft as the rich river bottom on the inside. On the second story of a many-windowed house, graced by the sun’s evening angles, she poured another scotch and looked out over the country to which she was given in matrimony on the day of her birth, the country that was her heart, her child, her double-gendered parent, her identity. The country that ruled her life, both with love and weather, three hundred square miles of tyranny and cradle.

For over sixty years Shiney Lewis had looked out over, or ridden over, or driven over, or – even once – flown over this land, had reached her hands toward it when nothing else made sense – this country where cows kept eating the grass and turning it into beef, where an ever-changing cast of cowboys moved them down to the low country in winter and up into the pines in summer, and where, for many springs, two big bands of mares gave birth to short, athletic, rock-footed, cow-watching ranch horses that attracted buyers who drove out to stand and spit and bargain. That heyday passed, as most do, and the buyers’ tastes changed, and too many people started breeding horses. Now, simple nostalgia allowed a few old mares to stand around the headquarters and crop the dry winter grasses, bellies swelling.

Almost every day of her life the silver-haired lady has walked to the

tinaja north and west of the big house. The tinaja – a place where men, women, children, deer, skunks, mountain lions, the rare elk come down to visit the low country, always a squirrel and a coon, sometimes a sure-footed horse, often a cow, went for the absolute peace of the place. Or a drink of water. In August it is almost certainly dry, but, oh, hope drives one to scramble over the boulders and through the brush anyway. In January, it is almost certainly crusted with ice. Then there are those times when the basin, and sometimes two or three basins of water in steps, are full and edged with the lace of small animal tracks and the deeper impressions of big ones, like coats of arms pressed into wax wafers, mud atop the rock. The eccentric old lady, as she now thinks of herself even if others do not, walks to this place via a faint path through the junipers and oakbrush, one she could have followed in her sleep.

Sunshine Angel Lewis started out life with eccentricity as the norm. Her mother was a pale gray child bride from back East who went straight back east as soon as her baby was born. The accepted story was that she had health problems, but no one in the West ever saw the lady again. She left the infant behind with her large, loud husband who walked into the hospital room the evening of his daughter's birth with an armful of flowers and a snootful of whiskey, booming, "She's my sunshine angel, by Gawd, my own little sunshine angel! We'll just tack her old pappy's last name to that, and brand her as Lewis stock!"

It took him a lot of talking the next morning to convince the nurses that he really meant it, and several of them quietly consulted the mother who lay pale on her pillows looking east. Some of the nurses didn't blame the woman for leaving the big red-faced man, but they did wonder at a mother who could get on a train without her newborn. But in the end, or rather, the beginning, the little girl was Sunshine Angel Lewis, "Shiney" by her second birthday, and no one delighted her more than the father who toted her out to live in the shadow of Bride Mountain when she was one week old.

No one knew where Paul Amato Lewis came from originally, just that he showed up in the Southwest with a pocketful of money and an English backer who rode out on the train every fall to sit in the old hotel beside the depot. There the Englishman ate one well-done steak (putting him immediately in a questionable light with the locals) and drank one whiskey with "Punch," as Paul Lewis was known by then. There was considerable speculation as to whether the Englishman just went on

back to wherever he came from or whether he went on to the next cowtown and then the next because he had ranches all over the West. Whatever the case, everyone was so used to having Punch in the community that they forgot to notice when one year the Englishman didn't come, not then, and never again.

Punch Lewis had earned his place among them by putting together one of the largest ranches in the state with the help of Ernesto Chavez. Nesto was Punch's best friend, his foreman, and his cow boss, and if a man didn't want to work for a "Mexican," then in Punch's opinion, that man could go on down the road. Nesto was widely considered the best cowboy in the country.

When Punch brought his newborn daughter home to the Tinaja, he had the foresight to bring along Damaris, a petite but decidedly round young woman with long blonde braids wrapped around her head, a strong Norwegian accent, blue eyes, and skin that was apt to turn bright red whenever she was mad or embarrassed or overly warm. She set herself and the infant up in Punch's cabin while Punch moved into the bunkhouse with his cowboys and stepped up the pace of construction on the Big House that was still half-built.

Damaris was more than a baby nurse. She was Sunshine Angel Lewis's mother right from the beginning. She was everyone's mother. She mothered Punch, mothered the cowboys, mothered the barn cats and the dogs and the dogie calves. The only person she didn't mother was Nesto, and she was likely to throw her apron over her face as if to disappear whenever he came around. This behavior puzzled Nesto considerably and puzzled Punch, too, but when Shiney was almost a year old, the odd couple, Damaris, short and round and golden, next to Nesto, tall and thin and dark, went to the ranch owner and told him they were getting married. Punch went roaring out of his makeshift office in the bunkhouse, hunted up the construction foreman and demanded that the blueprints for the Big House be altered immediately. He added a whole wing expressly for Nesto and Mama D, as she had become known, and before too many months had passed they all moved into the monstrosity. The newlyweds immediately began filling their part of the house with little Chavez offspring, siblings for Shiney. The whole passel of kids looked alike except that when each one popped out, no one could be sure if it was going to have black hair or blonde, blue eyes or brown.

Mama D got rounder and rounder as the years went by, mainly

because she was constantly frying, roasting, harvesting, rolling dough, and pouring batter, though Shiney always wondered how she got so fat because she was always moving. No one could remember her ever filling a plate for herself, much less sitting down to eat. She had a huge garden, a noisy and underfoot flock of chickens, and the Big House was always spotless. She still threw her apron over her face when Nesto teased her, but she reigned as unchallenged queen over the Tinaja.

Mama D learned to speak Spanish just as fast as Nesto, and louder, though with her old accent intact. The two of them and Punch spoke Spanish as often as they did English until Shiney started school, and then Punch demanded that only English be spoken at meals, which they ate together at a big trestle table.

“Family!” Punch would roar. “Family is what you make it, and by Gawd, this is a family!” And he would bang his fist on the table where Shiney even now drank her coffee of a morning. And it *was* family – a big mixed-up colorful family. The only custom that set the ranch owner and his daughter apart from the noisy Chavez brood was Punch’s after dinner habit of disappearing into his library where Shiney joined him. There the two of them sat in big red leather chairs, and Punch read aloud to his girl from books he ordered, ones that came in the mail wrapped in brown paper. Later on, she did her homework while he worked on correspondence and read livestock journals. Shiney learned to love the smell, and later the taste, of fine Scotch on these evenings with her father.

Shiney rarely saw her real mother, and then only when Punch took her east expressly for that purpose. She never talked about those visits. When she was fourteen, for reasons that only Punch and his wife knew or understood, Shiney’s father sent her to her mother for the summer. She had been gone two weeks when Mama D burst into the ranch office where Punch was working on the accounts. From the beginning she had called Shiney “My Baby.” Even after she started popping out little rainbow babies of her own, Shiney was always My Baby. Mama D was fascinated by the ranch’s new telephone that rang simultaneously in the Big House and in the original old cabin that had become the ranch office. Rarely did anyone else get a chance to answer it. On this day, she had answered its ring in the kitchen as she stirred a big pot of green chili stew, so if she was red-faced because of that, or because it was June, or because of indignation, who knew. She stamped her fat little foot at

Punch and declared, “My Baby is miserable back there in that East, and I am going to get her! My Baby needs to come home.” With that and a string of Spanish curses uttered in a Norwegian accent, she turned and waddled back to the house, yelling at one of her boys to get her suitcase down out of the attic. Punch followed as fast as he could, but by the time he found her again, she had already packed her bag and had her “going to town” hat pinned over her braids. It became something of ranch legend how he bellowed at Mama D to “take off that hat and calm down!” Punch ended up retrieving Shiney from “that East” himself, but from then on, when someone wanted to tease Mama D about her temper, they would yell, “Take off that hat, Mama D, and calm down!” Everyone would laugh uproariously, except Mama D who would threaten the teaser with her wooden spoon.

When Punch brought Shiney home that summer, the girl went straight up to her room, put on her cowboy clothes and never wore a dress again. Ever. Three days later she walked into the kitchen carrying Mama D’s sewing shears. Mama D gasped, “My Baby. *Pobrecita. Venga*, let me help you.” When she’d done the best she could with what was – left, Mama D waddled to the barn where Punch was doctoring a sick horse and said, “Now you listen to me. My Baby has cut off her hairs. And you will tell her it looks nice. Do you hear me? You will say that she is just beautiful with her hairs like a boy’s. I mean it, Punch Lewis. *Muy bonita*.” Mama D kept Shiney’s hair cut short for her from then on.

Punch Lewis got word that his wife had died when Shiney was eighteen, and many said that with that word he also became the trustee of a large sum of money that Shiney inherited on her twenty-first birthday. By that time, Shiney had gone east again, this time to college, and no amount of pleading from Mama D on My Baby’s behalf could bring her home. During those years, Shiney would visit the ranch on holidays and ride her horse for hours, very often sleeping up on the slopes of Bride Mountain, but she rarely spoke in detail about her life at the elite women’s university where she spent her other days. After four years, Shiney walked into her father’s office, put her leather-bound diploma on his desk.

“I did what you wanted. Now I am going to do what I want.”

And she went away again. She spent two years going through a newly established ranch management and animal husbandry program at a Texas university, the first woman to ever do so, and then, Sunshine Angel Lewis came home to the Tinaja for good. She split her time

between the ranch office where she fought huge and bloody battles with her father about modernizing the ranch's accounting system and outside horseback with the cowboys where she worked as hard as any man.

All of the Chavez children grew up and moved away. Punch Lewis made sure that they all went to college and they all earned master's degrees. Two of them earned PhDs. One by one, or in little clusters, they drove out to the Tinaja to see Shiney around Christmas. They all loved Shiney Lewis.

No one ever knew of Shiney having a suitor, a lover, or even going on a date. There was an old faded ranch rumor that Nesto's oldest son had loved her, but if so, he went away never having done anything about it. Shiney always referred to the Chavez children as her brothers and sisters, even if she was the only child to have her own bedroom in the Big House.

Shiney became a true orphan when she was thirty years old, on the day that Punch Lewis died of a heart attack while helping gather the River Pasture. Punch rode in to the hold-up with the biggest wad of cows of anyone, and when he got there, he slid off of his big bay horse and onto the ground, dead before anyone could get to his side.

Shiney was the first one to reach her father, kneeling in the dirt, her hands like birds fluttering above, but not quite touching, his chest. Nesto and one of the other men knelt there with her until Nesto looked up. "*Está muerto, niña. Su papa está muerto.*" None of the eight or so men there that day ever forgot the young woman's eyes when she raised them from her father's body.

Two of the hands followed her tracks back to headquarters. They found her horse unsaddled and in the corral, but they didn't see Shiney. For several weeks, no one did, other than Nesto and Mama D, except on the day of the funeral, for just one hour, as she stood with her head down and her cowboy hat on beside the woman who raised her while they buried her Papa on the knoll overlooking the tinaja.

Legend on the ranch also had it that on the day Shiney finally did come out of the Big House, she came down to breakfast and sat down across from Nesto. "Nesto, I have been drinking one scotch with Papa every night since the day I turned eighteen. Last night I had two. It's time I got horseback again. Someone's got to run this ranch."

And Shiney Lewis has been running the Tinaja ever since . . . and she is tired.