

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

Chapter 5: My Country Right or Wrong

“Step into my office,” Mitch said, slinging the door open wide, so that one minute we were blinded by sunlight and the next cratered in darkness. I had never been in the lounge at The Starlight Hotel during daytime, and for a minute I felt disoriented; I wasn’t used to seeing the ocean so sparkling blue outside the windows, or the sun spots on the wooden floor made from the same planks they’d used to build the boardwalk. Len, the bartender, looked paler than he did at night, his stubble more pronounced, and even the smell was worse because the stench of ammonia mixed with beer foam that clung to most bars in Elephant Beach was like smelling an antiseptic hangover. I felt a gag rising at the back of my throat as Len set my ginger ale in front of me. I would have left, but I’d been wanting to talk to Mitch, and had run into him at Eddy’s, buying cigarettes, and since he didn’t love going to the beach (“Hard to stomp around in the sand, man,”) and he tended to shun bright sunlight for long periods (“The glare! The glare!”), we’d ended up in the lounge at The Starlight Hotel.

Mitch wasn’t a local like the rest of us; he was originally from San Francisco. When Billy asked him once why he didn’t go back to California, why anyone would choose Elephant Beach over San Francisco, he said, “Because all that hippie dippy candles-in-the-park, strung-out in-the-Haight bullshit ruined it for me, that’s why. Since when is watching a 13-year-old runaway freak out on acid a Goddamned tourist attraction? Peace, love and happiness, my ass. Bunch of con artists is all they are, man, picking your fucking pocket with a smile.”

Mitch was twenty nine; his beard was threaded with gray and even though he rarely sat in the sun, his face was dark and weathered, which made his eyes all the more startling. They were

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

this really intense blue-green, the color of Caribbean water, and they blazed out of his face like bullets. I wanted to talk to him because he was older and he'd been in the same war as Luke and he knew things that might help me to understand Luke better. I had to talk quickly, though, because once Mitch reached a certain point in his drinking it would be useless to try and get his opinion on anything. The good thing was, the drunker he got, he wouldn't remember most of what we'd talked about so he wouldn't be able to repeat it to anyone else we knew. The trick was to get his wisdom on the subject before he reached "the click," "that place between the last drink you should have had and the last drink you actually drank. You know, the one you're still tasting the next morning, while your head's exploding and you're sitting around waiting for the room to blow up," he once explained to me.

We were sitting in the same corner that he'd been sitting in with Luke when Luke had first come out that night a week ago. Mitch's cane was hooked over the back of the barstool; it was made out of bloodwood, reddish-brown, with a silver dragon's head that fit the curl of his fingers perfectly. He'd bought it at a pawnshop next door to the VA hospital in Manhattan, "like it was right there waiting for me, right in the fucking window, man," and the pawnbroker had given him a discount because he was a veteran. Sometimes, when Mitch was really lit, he left the cane in the bar and stumped up the stairs to his room without it, but there was never any danger of it getting lost or stolen. Everyone knew the cane was his, and Len would just keep it behind the bar until he stumbled downstairs the next day or whenever, ready to begin all over again.

Mitch eyed my ginger ale with disgust. "That all you're having?" he said. "Bah! C'mon, have a real drink. Disability check came today, so the sky's the limit."

"No thanks," I said. "I have to be at work by three."

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

“It’s only eleven thirty,” Mitch said. “Plenty of time to sober up by then.”

“I’m fine,” I said. Sitting in a bar at this hour was bad enough, but drinking at this hour would make me as bad as the women that hung around the boardwalk bars, those women with sunken eyes and sagging faces and puckered cleavage you’d see whenever you went into places like the Shipwreck Tavern to buy cigarettes or use the bathroom.

Mitch shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said. He lit a cigarette, then held the match out to me, cupped in his hands. He took a long pull on his drink. Then he leaned forward and I could smell yesterday’s sweat and the taste of gin on his breath. I could see the pint bottle of Gordon’s sticking out of the brown paper bag in his jacket pocket. His fingernails were dirty, the cuticles crusted. But Liz was right. There was something sexy about Mitch, about the way his fingers cupped the flame, the way he looked at you with those piercing eyes.

He blew out the match and caught me watching him. “What?” he asked.

“Liz is right,” I said. “You do have sexy wrists.”

Mitch smiled, then winked at me. “Yeah,” he drawled. “But not as sexy as—what’s that cat’s name? The one just got back from Nam?”

I startled, looking around to make sure nobody had heard him. All I could see were shadows against the bar.

“Relax,” Mitch said. “I mean, shit, I can’t even remember his name.”

“How’d you know that—”

“Happened before the click,” he said. “I saw you lingering by the jukebox, trying to scope us out. Plus, I saw how you were looking at him when you thought no one else was looking, and besides, I knew you weren’t biding your time for Mitchell J. Ronkowski, the one-

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

legged wonder, whose romantic aspirations are confined to the five fingers of love.” He leaned back and laughed uproariously, banging his drink on the bar. He began coughing as if he would choke to death. Len poured a glass of water and came and set it down in front of Mitch. “Take it easy,” he said. Mitch guzzled the water, then pushed his liquor glass out for a refill. He turned back to me and said, “As you were saying, my dear.”

I drew a short breath. “A couple things.”

“I’m at your disposal,” Mitch said. “For as long as you need me, or until the booze renders me unconscious, whichever comes first.”

“First, you think guys really like virgins better?” I asked.

“Better than what?” Mitch said.

“Better than chicks who sleep with other guys,” I said. “Who sleep around.”

Mitch’s face looked pained. “Not that Madonna-whore crap,” he said. “Didn’t all that free love bullshit put an end to that nonsense?”

“Not around here it didn’t,” I said.

“Bah!” Mitch scoffed. “Around here? I’d say the priority around these parts is catching a buzz. Half the cats around here are too stiff to get stiff, you get my meaning. They may be thinking about it, and they may be talking about it, but I’d bet my next disability check there’s a lot more talk than action.” Above us, we heard Roof Dog howling, the German Shepard who lived on the roof of The Starlight Hotel. “See there, even that Goddamned dog agrees with me,” he said.

Mitch did have a point. That night that me and Bennie had walked down to the abandoned lifeguard chair, I was after experience; seeing if I could feel something for another

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

guy even while I was so into Luke. We'd climbed up on the chair and had gotten all cozy and I was actually a little turned on. Bennie had a great body for a junkie, and those beautiful eyes. But it turned out he hadn't gotten his stash until late in the evening so he'd taken his nightly dosage of 'ludes later than usual, and, as a result, it was like his tongue went to sleep in my mouth. I'd left him sprawled and snoring in the moonlight, alerted Voodoo and Billy so they could find him and carry him to his aunt's house on Sister Street, and caught the last bus home. By the time I was in my room smoking my last cigarette before going to sleep, I was more relieved than anything else.

“Some guys are always going to go for that pure-as-the-driven snow stuff,” Mitch was saying. “But there's others more enlightened, shall we say, prefer someone who knows their way around the sheets just a little.” He took a cigarette from the pack of Camels in his shirt pocket, lit one, and exhaled, long and slow. The smoke mingled with the dusty sunlight slanting through the porthole windows behind the bar. “Six of one, half dozen of the other, really,” he said, squinting through the smoke. “But Goddamn, where do all these myths come from? Like women being the weaker sex. Bah! That's a good one. Think the Pill liberated you, and that had nothing to do with it.” He took the cigarette from his mouth and pointed it towards me, the ashes falling on the bar. “Women always got the power, they just don't know how to use it. Too ready to hand over the reins to any asshole with a pecker. Shit, all the scars I carry inside me—and a few on the outside, come to think of it—I got from a woman. Lot of truth to that old saying, ‘One hair off a pussy can pull a freight train.’” He raised his glass and drained it. I stared into Mitch's face. His eyes still looked okay. I was about to ask another question, but then he said, “Besides, virginity is the least of your problems with that cat—what's his name again?”

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

“Luke?” I asked.

“Yeah, him,” Mitch said. “I don’t know, darlin’. You might want to shine it on with that enterprise, maybe reconsider.”

I felt cold inside, like a piece of ice was rubbing against my bones. “Why do you say that?” I asked.

Mitch shrugged. “At the very least, you got to give it time,” he said. “He’s back, what? A month, maybe?”

“How much time?” I asked, and even I could hear the anxiety in my voice.

Mitch looked at me sharply. “What’s the rush?”

“No rush,” I said. “It’s just that—” I closed up. I didn’t want to tell him about the years of waiting, the years of watching Luke like I was watching a movie over and over, hoping the ending would be different.

“Listen, things happen over there,” Mitch said. His voice dipped a shade, as though something was weighing it down. “War does things to a cat.”

“Like what things?” I asked. “I mean, I know it must have been horrible, but—”

“Darlin’,” Mitch said, gently, “You’re a beautiful kid, but you don’t know shit. Now, don’t take it personally. Because neither does anyone else who hasn’t had the pleasure.”

“I read the papers,” I said, though this was only partially true. “And I saw on TV.—”

“Doesn’t mean shit,” he said. “Don’t mean shit to a tree. There’s shit over there, is what I’m saying. Bad shit. Scary shit. And the Viet Cong are the least of it. At least you know they’re the enemy.” Mitch drank long and greedily. “Minefields everywhere you look. Tiny little

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

whores, so beautiful they could make your heart stop, packing razor blades. Viet Nameese birth control, cut you right where it hurts. Had a buddy killed one of ‘em for what she done to him.”

I shuddered, just thinking about it. I had enough trouble shaving my legs, trying not to cut my shinbone to ribbons with the razor. “But how does that even work?”

“No fucking idea, but the damage is done,” Mitch said. He licked the dregs of his glass and signaled to Len for another.

“And then you come back,” he said. “To this fucking sinkhole. All that stars and stripes forever crap. And instead of a ticker tape parade—though you ask me, who needs that bullshit—you get some sixteen-year-old twat—sorry sweetheart, but that’s what she was—whose dress doesn’t even cover her ass, asking are you proud of yourself, killing all those babies. And nobody wants to hire you because all they remember out of the whole fucking war is the My Lai massacre and they think you’re some kind of monster. But no one ever talks about the four-year-olds with dynamite strapped all over ‘em, walking at you, waving, ‘Hey, GI! Okay, GI!’ Putting their arms out for you to pick ‘em up and hug ‘em so you could blow the fuck up.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to ask what Luke had told him, but I knew that even if Mitch remembered the conversation, he wouldn’t tell me.

“And then, when you can’t take it anymore, you turn to Uncle Sam for help, and look at what happens.” Mitch shook his head and made the sign of the cross with his middle finger.

“Those poor bastards.” He was talking about the Veteran’s Hospital in St. Cecily’s Parish, over in Suffolk County. It had been in all the papers, the news stations, everywhere. They had a weekly support group for Viet Nam veterans having a hard time adjusting to life back in the states. The group had nine men in it, plus the psychologist who ran it. On a rainy Thursday,

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

while they were all sitting around talking about whatever people in support groups talk about, one of the veterans took out a .22 pistol and shot up the men in the group. He killed five of them, including the psychologist, and most of the others were critically injured. Afterwards, he just sat there until the cops came and arrested him. When they asked him why, he just kept saying, “dung lye, dung lye,” over and over again. *Newsday* said “dung lye” means “no more” in Viet Namese.

“Excuse me, pal.” A voice came down from the end of the bar, hidden by the dust motes dancing through the streaming sunlight. It came from the group of construction workers sitting at the other end of the bar. “Some of us don’t appreciate hearing this country being referred to as ‘a fucking sinkhole.’”

“Is that so?” Mitch asked, like he was really interested.

“Yeah, it’s so,” another voice said.

“What company you fight in?” Mitch asked quietly. “Where were you, ’68, ’69? Danang? Saigon? Mekong Delta?”

“I was in Korea,” the voice said. It was a fat man’s voice. I couldn’t make out faces or features in their sunlit silhouettes, but their asses were crowding their barstools, hanging over the sides.

“Korea? You mean that pussy war, lasted about two minutes?” Mitch asked, like he was making polite conversation.

I heard the stools swivel and shift, heard the creaking as someone stood up, his work boots hitting the floor.

“I’d watch my mouth, I was you, pal,” the voice said again.

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

“There’s some of us here still believe that America is the greatest country on earth,” someone else said.

“Then some of us must be real fucking assholes,” Mitch said, blowing smoke rings. They rose in the dim light, up to the ceiling.

Len was looking back and forth between Mitch and the construction workers. “Let’s take it easy,” he said, his fingers curling around the brass rungs behind the bar.

“You don’t like it here, why don’t you move to Russia?” one of the construction workers asked.

“Too fucking cold,” Mitch said, shaking his head. “Listen though, let me ask you something: You love your kids?”

“Leave my kids out of this,” the fat voice said.

“You love ‘em?” Mitch asked again.

“I said—”

“Yeah, yeah, I love my kids,” the other voice said. “So what? What’s that got to do with anything?”

“You ever criticize ‘em?” Mitch asked. “Yell at ‘em? Hit ‘em, maybe?”

There was silence at the other end of the bar. Someone snorted and said, “This fucking guy—”

“Tell ‘em get a haircut, get better grades, turn the music down?” Mitch asked. “Ground ‘em for cutting school? Smack ‘em upside the head for sassing their mother? Tell ‘em, ‘you get knocked up, don’t bother coming home?’”

Silence, still, at the other end of the bar.

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

“You ever wish you never had ‘em?” Mitch asked.

“Shut it down, now, you son of a bitch,” one of the men said. “Shut it down right now, or—”

“You still love ‘em?” Mitch asked.

More silence. A lighter flared. Someone raised his mug to his lips and took a long draught. I couldn’t make out their faces in the dim light. I couldn’t tell the color of their eyes.

“Yeah, you still love ‘em,” Mitch said, lighting a Camel. “You can talk all that shit about ‘em, but you still love ‘em.”

“The fuck’s he talking about?” one of the men said.

Mitch laughed, and the sound of it was warm and rich. He drained his drink and got up from his stool, leaning against the bar for balance “The fuck am I talking about,” he said, shaking his head.

“Go fuck yourself, you commie prick,” the fat voice said loudly.

“If I could’ve done that, I wouldn’t have gotten out of bed this morning,” Mitch said.

Two of the men began moving forward. They were big and pretty bald with beer guts hanging over their tool belts. I didn’t recognize them. I was glad they didn’t appear to be somebody’s father or uncle. Somebody’s brother I might have to recognize.

“Let’s take it down a notch,” Len said, quietly, from behind the bar.

“Guy’s got a big mouth,” the fat voice said.

Mitch stepped forward, further into the light. The younger construction worker with more hair looked down at Mitch’s stump. He put his hand on the fat man’s arm. He nodded toward Mitch’s wooden leg. Mitch never covered it up. He wore his pants rolled up to just below his

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

knee, where the wooden leg began. He watched the men looking. He smiled so that his face creased up. His eyes were the brightest thing in the room.

“Don’t let that stop you,” he said softly.

“Let’s take it down a notch,” Len said again. “Let’s everybody relax and have another drink. On the house.” Everybody liked Len. He knew how to run a bar right. He had silver hair but his face was young. He’d been laid off the iron works, which was why he tended bar at the lounge at The Starlight Hotel.

“Sure,” the younger construction worker said. “Sure.” He turned back to the bar, to the place where the other men were standing. The fat man waited a minute longer before walking back to his place at the bar.

Len served the construction workers first. When he began making Mitch’s boilmaker, Mitch put up his hand and shook his head, “no.” He threw some bills on the bar and picked up his jacket with the bottle of Gordon’s in the pocket and began walking toward the door that led to the rooms in the hotel. He’d left his cane on the back of his chair, but neither Len nor I called after him to take it. He whistled “The Star Spangled Banner” as he walked through the door. You could hear him whistling as he walked up the stairs to his room, one step at a time

“Guy’s got an attitude problem,” the fat voice said.

“Lay off, Jimmy,” one of the men said.

“Hey, he’s not the only one, is all I’m saying,” the fat man said. “He’s not the only one came back—”

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

“Everything alright over there?” Len said, sharply. “Your drinks okay? Tastes alright?” He stared down the bar at the men, his arms stretch out behind him. Len kept a bat behind the bar. On the shelf just opposite the taps for the draft beer.

“We’re good,” one of the men finally said.

“Alright then,” Len said. He stared at the construction workers until they began talking among themselves. Then he came down the bar and took my glass and filled it with fresh ice and ginger ale. He nodded toward Mitch’s cane, and I handed it over the bar to him. Len put it on the shelf where he kept the baseball bat. One of the men walked over to the jukebox and put money in. Tony Bennett started singing, “Fly Me to the Moon.” The construction worker stood over the jukebox, his eyes closed, snapping his fingers in time to the music.

Len leaned his elbows on the bar and sighed. “Sometimes I hear him at night, screaming,” he said. “After everyone’s gone, when I’m closing up. Screaming himself to sleep. And then it’s quiet for a while and then he starts back up again.” Len pushed himself off the bar, shaking his head. “My brother-in-law, same thing,” he said. “Same damn thing, ever since he got home. My sister sleeps in the kids’ room. They’re scared to death of him. Of their own father.” The door to the lounge opened and a man and a woman walked in, laughing. I’d never seen them before, just like I’d never seen the construction workers or any of these other day time people. It was a whole different world, being in the lounge during daylight.

“No one’s sleeping in that house,” Len said, watching the couple sit down toward the middle of the bar. “Walking around like a bunch of zombies. The kids, everybody. They can’t get him to stop because he doesn’t even know he’s doing it. He wakes up in the morning, doesn’t remember a thing.” He shook his head and sighed again. He kept his eyes on the couple, waiting

If I knew you were going to be this beautiful, I never would have let you go

by Judy Chicurel

until they were fully settled, until the woman flounced her skirt over the barstool for the final time. Then he walked down the bar to serve them.