

Perth, Ontario, 1971

By Alex Mackenzie April 2010

He slipped ahead of the slow motion street browsers, past the sliding doors that were locked open in the heat of the late afternoon, and right in next to the cash registers. Ange would have just come off her shift and he wanted to be there when she came out of the changing room.

She wasn't expecting him, but that was the point.

A surprise.

She probably figured he was down at the mill until at least half past five and then straight home, if she was thinking at all. It had been three days since he had seen her, and it had ended badly on Sunday.

Morry gave him a lift when the shift ended early on account of some sadsack catching his leg in a machine at the bottom of the pier. They all saw it, and it was ugly enough that the mill sent everyone home. The guy wouldn't be walking normal again. Whatever the reason, it suited him fine to get out of there a little early.

Keep an eye on her Mitch, that's what Morry had said. Oh sure, like Ange fights them off all day long at Stedman's. She's a looker alright, but she's got no interest, that much Mitch knew. Morry probably had it in for her anyway.

A brown loosely curled perm appeared just behind the dress racks and down the aisle.

"Hi Bev. You out?"

Beverly stepped to the front of the store, looking distracted with a clipboard in hand, and swung her head up. This was Stedman's second wife. Not bad looking either. A hell of a lot younger than Stedman, which is all anyone talked about since they got hitched. But Mitch could care less. They seemed happy enough.

She was slim and very small. He guessed she was a shade over 5 feet without the perm. Her arms were sinewy and still dark from a trip to Florida months ago. Or maybe it was just smoker's arms. He imagined her legs might look the same under those slacks.

But her face made up for it. Big dark brown eyes and a small mouth that always looked puckered, like she was blowing you a kiss, only with no hand. He could see that her face was damp, and a few of the curls were sticking to her forehead.

"If you're lookin' for Ange, I can't say I've seen her, been up in the office all day 'til just now." Bev pushed her finger across the hair on her forehead guided by her long nails. "Friggin' hot." She looked him up and down, and her lips parted just a little. "What're you doin' here anyway? I don't imagine she's expecting you."

"Surprise."

She smiled a queer smile and gave him what seemed like a stern look.

"Oh Mitch—she'll love that."

Mitch flashed a smile back automatically, but was uncertain of her tone.

The air had stopped and they both needed to move to get it going again. Bev walked around Mitch to the registers, and Mitch turned slowly on his heel and headed to the back of the store down the main aisle, cutting left at the last discount rack—kids' snowsuits.

The door was open, and Mitch could already see through the reflection in the wall mirror that she wasn't inside. He went in anyway, and found her smock with the little hand-stitched "Ange", white on blue, hanging on the second hook. He pulled it up to his face and breathed in deep.

He thought about Bev.

And then he thought about Stedman.

And only then did he think about Ange.