

Tangerine Angel

Jenny Cooper stared at the horizon, framed all around by gorgeous gum, wattle, willow and paperbark trees. And for once her gaze wasn't looking at the trees, it was glued to the space above the trees where flames licked the sky and smoke swirled even higher as if reaching up to the heavens.

A sense of déjà vu overwhelmed her as she remembered standing in this exact spot next to her father as an innocent six year old child and watching the sky turn orange as the flames drew closer.

She heard her husband Jim come up behind her and without taking her eyes off the raging bushfire she asked, "Where are the girls?"

"Hayley's at Kylie's and Cassie is in her room" he replied. Without turning to look she knew he too was watching the flames. A moment of awe and wonder at such a beautiful destructive force before panic set in.

"We need to go" she said suddenly, a sense of fear eating her up inside. Bad memories were attached to bushfires. Twenty years ago when she had stood beside her father and watched the fire rage closer and closer she had only felt fascination. It wasn't until a few hours later when she had been picked up by her father and thrown into the car that she had started to worry. Her six year old instincts had picked up that something was wrong. Her parents seemed worried about the fire, and Jenny's older sister Phoebe had not been in the car.

But it wasn't until they got into town where people in yellow uniforms were rushing about in fire-trucks that she had known something was terribly wrong.

Then, when no one could find her sister...

Jenny pushed the thoughts away and turned away from the fire, shutting it out.

"Get Cassie, we need to go" she said.

Jim didn't question her, just hurried through the house to Cassie's bedroom.

Jenny glanced over her shoulder at the fire and wished it would go away. It was unlikely it would burn down their house, it had survived the last bushfire and Jenny was confident it would again. But she still didn't want to get caught here in case the fire raged across the river.

"Cassie!" at her husband's anxious tone Jenny hurried to his side and found he was staring into Cassie's empty room.

"Where is she?" Jenny demanded in a panicked tone.

"I don't know" said Jim, his tone anxious.

"We need to find her" said Jenny, rushing off to check the other rooms.

"What about Hayley?" Jim called after her, also checking the rest of the house.

"She's at Kylie's and they'll already be gone" said Jenny confidently as she determined Cassie was not in the house, "I'll check the garden for Cassie"

The garden itself could pass as a miniature jungle. The large ferns and other plants made it seem wild and out of control.

"Cassie?" she called, sifting through the plants looking for her eight year old daughter.

As she combed through more and more of the garden, her sense of fear grew. As much as she tried not to she remember the day she had realised her sister wasn't coming home.

She had only been six, Hayley's age, but she remembered following her parents through the crowd while they looked for her eight year old sister amongst the other people who

had abandoned their homes to seek refuge in the small town out of the way of the fire. She even remembered the fire-fighter that had told her parents they had found Hayley's body amongst the burnt out trees near their house.

"Mummy?" Jenny's heart burst with joy as she found her daughter crouching by the frog pond.

"Come on Cassie, we have to go now" said Jenny, glad that history wasn't going to repeat itself. Relief rushed through her but panic about the fire still bloomed in her chest.

"Where are we going?" asked Cassie, staring up at her mother as she took her hand.

Jenny led the way back to the house, explaining they had to leave incase the fire came too close.

"What about Hayley?" Cassie asked, her tone worried, obviously picking up on her mother's anxiety.

Jenny called out to her husband that she had found Cassie before answering, "Hayley's at Kylie's house, remember"

"But I thought I saw her coming home" Cassie said and for a moment Jenny felt a flutter of fear then she reasoned that Kylie's parents wouldn't have let her come home on her own.

"You can't have" Jenny assured her daughter then tucked her in the car.

They drove down their driveway and paused, Jenny looked out her husband's window and saw the flames creeping closer, then they were heading toward the town and there was no way she could see the fire.

Many people were already in the town, gathering around to offer comfort to those who were already homeless and those about to be.

Jenny knew that Kylie and her parents would look after Hayley but she still sought them out. She felt a moment of relief when she saw them, then a flicker of fear began to grow as she realised Hayley wasn't with them.

She greeted Wendy and Travis White then asked calmly where Hayley was.

Wendy and Travis exchanged worried looks and Jenny's heart sank.

"We thought she was with you" Wendy said, her tone beginning to tremble, "She went home after she and Kylie had a fight"

"She never made it home" Jenny heard Jim say. A moment later she fainted into her husband's arms.

"Where are we going?" Hayley huffed after the girl in orange, who seemed to be able to climb these rocks much easier than she could.

"To a safe place" the girl said. And she glanced over her shoulder. Hayley felt a shiver go up her spine again as she looked into the girl's strange eyes which seemed to reflect a fire that wasn't there.

"Why are we going to a safe place?" Hayley demanded as they finally reached the top of the rock mountain.

That was when she saw the bushfire. It was raging toward them with the purpose of destruction. Hayley heard herself scream then she tried to scramble back down but the girl in orange stopped her.

"No, you safe here" the girl insisted.

Hayley trembled at the sight of the fire but somehow knew she could trust this girl.

The girl in orange sat down on one of the top rocks and turned way from the fire. Hayley did the same. She studied the girl which she had followed into the hills after her fight with Kylie. She had wanted someone to play with and the girl in orange had come out of nowhere and offered to play with her if they went into the hills. Hayley knew she shouldn't follow strangers but something about the girl seemed familiar. As Hayley stared at the girl she realised the girl in orange looked a bit like her, the same red hair and blue eyes, the same freckles and even the same birthmark on the side of their neck in the shape of a flame. Except the girl in orange was older, about her older sister Cassie's age. "Are you an angel?" Hayley asked curiously.

"An angel?" the girl said, confused.

"You know, like one from Tangerine Sky" Hayley said, unable to believe the girl had never heard of Tangerine Sky.

Since the girl still looked confused Hayley sang the first few lines, "They called it Hell on earth; they said it was a dragon's fire"

"You shouldn't swear" the girl said as if speaking automatically.

"I know, but mum lets me use that one bad word when we sing Tangerine Sky" Hayley explained that the song was a very special one to them because of her aunt Phoebe who had died in those terrible fires twenty years ago.

The girl in orange nodded as if she understood completely, "I'd like to learn that song" Then she turned and looked back at the fire. Hayley followed her gaze and realised how close the fire was. She knew that the fire was reflected not only in the girl's eyes, but in her own now.

"I think your right" the girl whispered.

“About what?” Hayley asked, her eyes glued to the approaching inferno.

“It does look like hell on earth”

“They’ll find her” Jim assured his wife as they sat in the house of one of their friends.

Jenny didn’t reply. She knew personally that not everyone was found in a fire. Phoebe had vanished in a fire just like this one.

She winced inwardly as she realised that she had become slightly obsessed with keeping Cassie away from the fire. She looked and acted nothing like Phoebe, but Cassie was also the firstborn. When the reports had come through that the bushfires were raging their way Jenny had been too distracted with keeping Cassie by her side that she had forgotten that it was Hayley who loved fire, who looked similar to Phoebe with the same birthmark and hair and eyes, except Phoebe had only half an eyebrow on over her left eye. Jenny had no idea how that had happened.

She felt guilty that this time the bushfire would take away a six year old child. One she had neglected to take care of.

“We’ll find them Jenny”

Jenny didn’t hear, she was too busy watching the smoke rising higher and higher into the sky.

The bushfire raged on and on. It was days before people could go home to their houses or what was left of them.

Jenny, Jim and Cassie headed home in a numb state of shock. Despite everything the fire-fighters had been unable to locate Hayley. It was guessed that she was somewhere in the

charred black forest that was now the remainder of the beautiful bush that had once covered the mountains. Now a great black stretch of land ran through the bush like a scar. The day after arriving back at their house and attempting to settle into a life without Hayley, a strange car pulled into their driveway.

“We found her on the rocky outcrop way down between the mountains to the east” the man who got out of the car explained.

He reached into the back of the car and pulled out a sleeping Hayley wrapped up in a pale blue wool blanket.

Jenny wailed in delight and rushed forward to hold her daughter who promptly woke up and stared around sleepily.

Jim carried Hayley inside and lay her down on the couch, he attempted to give the blanket back to the man who had brought her home but he refused.

“Nah, she can keep it, least I can do” the man said. Then he left in a swirl of dust before Jim could say he’d already done so much for them.

Hayley slept for a few more hours and when she awoke she found her sister sitting beside her only half watching the cartoon playing on the TV.

Cassie called out to her parents when Hayley yawned and sat up.

“Where did you go Hayley?” Jenny said tenderly.

“I followed the Tangerine Sky angel up the rocks” Hayley mumbled sleepily.

“Why did you do that?” asked Jim.

“She said she would play with me if I followed but she didn’t” Hayley frowned at that,

“She left as soon as the fire did, she didn’t even get to hear the rest of the song”

“Which song?” asked Jenny.

“Tangerine Sky” said Hayley.

Jenny looked over Hayley’s head at Jim and he shrugged.

“What makes you think she was an angel?” Jim asked gently.

Hayley looked at her father with a look on her face that said, “*Isn’t the answer obvious?*”

then she said, “She had wings of fire, but I didn’t see them until the fire passed”

Jim nodded and Jenny smiled wisely. Obviously, they thought, it was just a dream, a make-believe friend Hayley had invented to help her through the trauma.

And perhaps an excuse to explain her behaviour in going up into the hills when she knew she shouldn’t.

The matter was left alone for years. Jenny and Jim encouraged Hayley through therapy and soon forgot she had even mentioned an angel of any sort.

Then out of the blue, when Hayley was grown up and married, she became an artist and showed her painting to her parents.

Jenny paled and would have fainted if not for the hand Jim held firmly.

The painting was of a burning forest, flames dancing amongst the trees as it burnt and climbed them like ladders tickling the top most leaves. Jenny had to admit the painting was beautiful as well as scary.

But what had caught her attention was the figure in the centre of the painting. It was of a girl in a flowing orange dress, red hair fanning out behind her head, hands raised and eyes bright and shining in exhilaration. A broad smile on her pretty face, and wings of flame spread out behind her back as if she was taking off in flight.

Jenny’s first thought was that it was Hayley as she had imagined herself in the bushfire so many years ago, or her supposed angel she had talked about.

But as Jenny studied then stared at the face of the girl, she suddenly became sure Hayley hadn't been faking it. She had truly seen an angel all those years ago in the bushfire. An angel with wings of fire, in an orange dress that shimmered as if it was alive. An angel with only half an eyebrow above her left, blue eye.