In 1987, a small fire at King’s Cross Station, in the London Underground, grew into a deadly inferno that cost 31 people their lives. This recount tells about the events of that day and explains why the fire at King’s Cross became such a terrible disaster.

Other Recounts (Disaster) in Springboard 5:
The Beaconsfield Mine Disaster
The New Orleans Flood Disaster

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Introduction

In 1987, a deadly fire struck at King’s Cross Station, a major stop on London’s subway system, the London Underground. The fire was small when it began. But in just 20 minutes it became an inferno. This fire was unusual. It was hotter than normal fires and it spread much faster. It took months of investigation to find out why this fatal fire was different.

Thirty-one people died in the King’s Cross fire. In response, the government passed new laws to make the London Underground stations safer. The fire should not have been able to grow so big. The station staff should have put it out when they first found it. The fire, at first, was very small. With proper safety measures, they could easily have extinguished it. Instead, it turned into a disaster.
November 18 began as a normal day at King’s Cross Station. One hundred thousand people passed through in the morning rush hour. King’s Cross is one of the busiest stations in the underground train system. The station has five levels. It is a station with more than one line running through it, or an **interchange station**. King’s Cross has six lines. Two of those lines are the Piccadilly and Victoria lines.

The evening of that day, however, was not normal. Instead, it ended in a disastrous fire. What caused the fire? At the time, some people thought it might have been arson. Others thought it might have been a terrorist attack. No one knows for sure, but it was probably a discarded match – a single match that caused the worst fire in the London Underground’s history.
The fire was very small when it began. At 7.30 p.m., a passenger stepped off a Piccadilly line train. He took the escalator to go up to the ticket hall. He was halfway up when he saw the smoke. It was coming through the gaps between the steps. He could also smell burning rubber. The passenger quickly raised the alarm. He pushed the emergency stop button and shouted to people below him to get off the escalator.

Two police officers saw what was happening and went to help. They found a fire under the number 4 escalator. The fire was small. Later, a firefighter said that it was no bigger than “a cardboard box.” But there were no fire extinguishers, and no sprinkler system. There was nothing they could do to stop the fire. But the two police officers were not worried. They thought the fire was too small to be dangerous. They had no idea that within 15 minutes it would turn into an inferno.