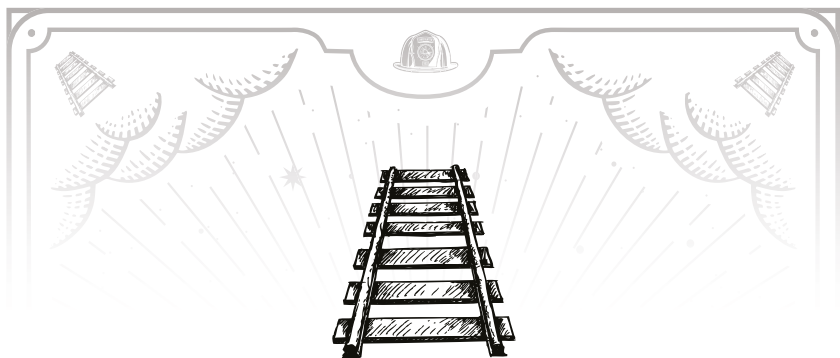




NO SURVIVORS

JENNIFER LISS



Chapter 1

PUTTING OUT FIRES

Uncle Chris always did his best to care for me. He had no idea what would happen. No one did.

My parents died in a car accident when I was two. Uncle Chris was only 19 at the time. He didn't know anything about raising kids. Yet he got stuck with me, a toddler in diapers.

He was still a kid himself. His high school graduation had only been six months earlier. But what choice did he have? My grandparents had all

passed away. I had a few distant cousins. Otherwise, Uncle Chris was my only family.

There had been no hesitation. Uncle Chris adopted me. He raised me like a son. His plan had been to go to college. But he changed his mind. My uncle became a wildland firefighter instead.

Somehow, he made it all work. Firefighting was dangerous and difficult. He sometimes had overnight shifts. When I was little, neighbors had taken care of me on those nights. Once I got older, I stayed home alone.

Uncle Chris was never very strict. Teachers would say how important schedules and routines were for children. They told my uncle that all the time. Most days, he got me to school late. Other students would already be at recess when we pulled up.

Dinner wasn't a normal routine either. One night, we would eat dinner at 5:00. The next night, we might order a pizza at 9:00.

My uncle had a lot of friends. They were all

firefighters too. I had fun hanging out with them. They took me fishing and camping. Most of them didn't have families. It was just us guys. I heard many jokes and stories. Some adults may have found them inappropriate. But I always felt loved. Uncle Chris was there for me. I knew he would do anything to protect me. That was the most important thing.

I was surprised when Uncle Chris told me I would be staying with Jane for the summer. She was a friend of his from high school. Jane had moved to the city after graduation. But they had kept in touch. I'd only met her a couple of times.

The firefighting season was longer now. Firefighters used to be away from their families for a few nights in a row. Now they could be on the front lines for weeks. Summers seemed to be a lot hotter here than they used to. Blazes were harder to manage. There were a limited number of experienced firefighters. My uncle was one of them. This season, his schedule was hectic. He didn't know how long he might be away from home.

I argued when he told me his plan. “I’m 12. That’s old enough to stay by myself. I want to be at home. Don’t make me stay with someone I hardly know.”

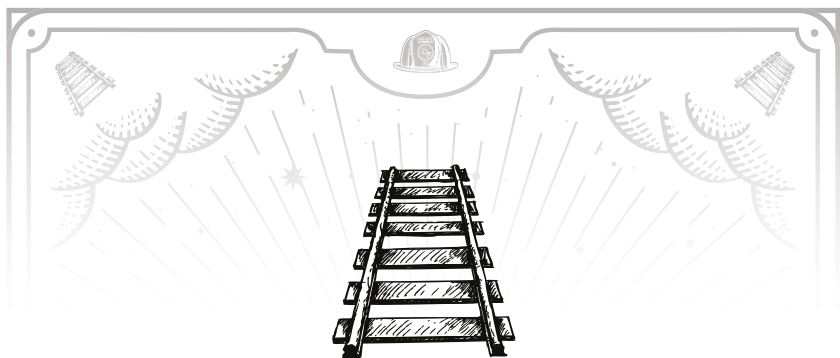
Uncle Chris said that he understood. But the decision was his to make, not mine. “Jane has two boys,” he said. “Her husband is a great guy. You’ll have fun. The summer will pass quickly. Before you know it, we’ll both be back here.”

I scowled and crossed my arms. “I don’t want to go.”

Uncle Chris seemed tired. “Look, Cruz, I understand. But I’ll be out in the field a lot. I don’t want to worry about you being home alone. What if something happens to me?”

In my gut, I knew he was right. The summer ahead of us would be dangerous.

However, it wasn’t my uncle that we had to worry about. It was me.



Chapter 2

THE TRAIN

Uncle Chris drove me to the train station. I'd never been on a train before. Everything I might need for the summer was packed into one bag and a small backpack.

We got to the station early. Inside, there was a large map of the train routes. We looked at it together. I followed Uncle Chris's finger as he traced the route I would be taking. After the train left our small town, it would pass through other

small ones. Then it would snake its way through a dense forest. On the other side of the forest were more towns. Then, finally, came the city where Jane and her family lived.

I started to feel a tiny bit of excitement. The train would be traveling through so many places and areas that I'd never been to before. I was about to go on an adventure. Plus, I was going to do it alone. It was kind of thrilling.

Uncle Chris gave me cash for the train ride. He told me to get whatever I wanted on board.

The train pulled into the station. People started to get on. A firefighter I'd met at Chris's station went up the train steps.

"Hey, isn't that Ashley?" I asked.

Uncle Chris nodded. "Yeah. She mentioned she was going to the city to see her boyfriend. I think she's just going for a couple of days."

"Should I get on?" I asked.

He seemed to hesitate. "Yep," he finally said.

I've thought about that moment a lot. Maybe Uncle Chris had reconsidered the plan. Had he almost changed his mind about sending me away?

I knew if I didn't board soon, I might get emotional. Neither one of us were the type to let strangers see how we were feeling inside. My uncle gave me a quick, tight hug. Then I picked up my bag and got in line.

The train was nicer than I'd expected. The seats were clean and comfortable. All the windows were wide. I found my seat, happy that it was by a window. Two empty seats were next to mine.

I threw my bag onto the rack above the seats and got settled. Then I looked out the window.

Uncle Chris was standing on the platform. His hands were shoved deep in his pockets. He was wearing his favorite jean jacket. The collar was pulled up around his neck.

I waved to him through the window. But he didn't see me. For some reason, I really wanted

one last moment with him before I left. Part of me considered texting him. But I didn't.

Soon enough, the final announcements were made. The doors closed, and the train started its journey. As soon as it began to move, Uncle Chris slowly shook his head. Then he turned to walk toward the parking lot.

NO SURVIVORS

Cruz is nervous to travel
by train for the first time.
His worries soon turn to
fear when the journey
goes horribly wrong.
Now Cruz wonders if
he'll ever be able to find
his way home.

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