

"Do you seriously want to spend the first day of the summer holidays with a bunch of dead people?" Josh asked. He was a tall, skinny boy, with brown skin, a broad nose and tight curls. If you had to pick one word to describe him, he'd be very disappointed in you, because Josh believed that a wide vocabulary was very important.

"They're buried!" Kit said. "It's not like they're zombies. It's just a cemetery. And it's so overgrown it's basically a park." Kit was stocky, pale and red-haired. If you had to pick one word to describe her, it would probably be "muddy".

"A park full of dead bodies," shuddered Josh.

“I don’t care if they’re buried. I’ll still know they’re there.”

It was the beginning of the summer holidays, and Kit and her friends were sitting on Kit’s bedroom floor, arguing about what to do that day.



"Let's go to the library instead," said Alita. "There are absolutely no dead bodies anywhere in the library."

"Yet," said Kit darkly. "What if I die of boredom?"

Alita was about half Kit's size in every direction. Her eyes were black, her skin was dark brown, and her thick black hair was divided into two perfect plaits. If you had to pick one word to describe her, it would probably be "intense". She had eyes that looked as if they could bore through solid concrete, like a meerkat escaping from a zoo enclosure.

Josh sat upright, making excited gestures with his long, skinny arms. "You won't die of boredom. There are so many books at the library!"

"But I don't like books," protested Kit. "They have words in them."

"*You* don't have to read them," said Alita. "But I need to get a book. Urgently. It's basically a matter of life and death."

"But it's so … *bluuuuurrrgh* in the library,"

complained Kit.

"Pleeeease," Alita went on. "I need the new Danny Fandango, and if we're not quick, all the copies will be gone. I've been waiting a YEAR to find out what happens next."

It was a beautiful sunny day. Kit, Josh and Alita were allowed to walk anywhere within a mile as long as they stuck together. Freedom was theirs. But for some baffling reason, Kit's friends wanted to go somewhere you had to be quiet and behave. Sometimes her friends made no sense. And not just when they used really long words.

"If we go to the cemetery instead of the library, we can climb trees!" said Kit. This, she felt, was a powerful argument.

"Or, to put it another way," said Josh, "if we go to the cemetery, we'll *have* to climb trees. And get mud on ourselves." He gestured down to his pristine trainers. Kit didn't understand how it was possible for shoes to stay that clean.

"And maybe, if we climb trees," Josh went on,

“we’ll fall from a great height and die.”

“We won’t die,” said Kit.

“OK, we’ll be maimed then,” said Josh. “I don’t want to be maimed. I want to read Danny Fandango.”

“Go on, Kit. We can go to the cemetery afterwards. We *promise*,” said Alita. She gave a pleading look, opening her dark eyes wide and fluttering her long eyelashes. Kit knew that trick – Alita was the baby of her family and she always got her own way.

“Yes, we promise. I swear on my signed copy of *Danny Fandango and the Cauldron of Poison*,” said Josh.

This was a serious oath, Kit knew. Josh kept the book in his bedroom in a glass case like it was a museum exhibit. Kit wouldn’t be surprised if he’d set up lasers and alarms all around it.

“Go on, Kit,” repeated Alita, who was almost as big a Danny Fandango fan as Josh, although not as into lasers. She was more likely to have trained

her dog to guard her copy. Alita's dog scared most people. It was big enough to ride like a horse. But Alita treated it like a cute little kitten and had named it Fluffy. She'd insisted they adopt it from a dog shelter. Kit wondered how the dog shelter people had stopped it from eating all the other dogs.

"I suppose we *could* go to the library *first*…" said Kit, thinking longingly about the overgrown cemetery with its spooky stone angels and matted undergrowth full of cool insects and – one blissful day – a rat. "But just quickly, all right?"

"Quick as Danny Fandango casting a Lightning Spell!" said Josh.

"Quick as Lara Fandango casting an even faster one!" said Alita.

Kit hadn't read any of the Danny Fandango books because reading required sitting still, and sitting still was against everything she stood for. But from what Kit had picked up from her friends, Lara was Danny's sister and she was better at magic, but he was the Chosen One, so got to do all

the fun stuff.

That sounded familiar. Kit's older brother and sister always got to do the fun stuff. Kit's Perfect Older Sister was Perfect In All Ways, according to her parents. Kit's Wicked Older Brother was a Bad Boy, and therefore required a lot of shouting, and attention, and when he did even the slightest thing right, he got presents. Kit's younger sister was only a toddler, and her job was to be Adorable and Covered In Jam. And her baby brother had a tiny screwed-up face, cried a lot, and was Precious and Good Enough to Eat.

Kit was … nothing in particular. She was average. Not incredibly clever, but not stupid. Not especially sporty, but not pathetically-unable-to-catch either. When people were picking teams, she was usually picked second or third. Never first. Never last.

The only non-average thing about her was her size. Growing out of her sister's hand-me-downs at an unnatural rate was her most remarkable quality,

according to her parents. She was in the top year of junior school now, but had grown out of all of Perfect Older Sister's school uniforms, so they'd had to buy a new one in the spring term. That led to a lot of tutting, but Kit didn't see how it was her fault. She wasn't growing on purpose. It just happened.

"Let's get it over with then," said Kit. "We're going out!" she called as she passed her parents and her two younger siblings in the living room.

Alita looked shocked by Kit's dad, who was holding Toddler upside down by her heels, bouncing her up and down like a sack of potatoes.

"Who's a bouncy bouncy bouncy?" he was saying.

Alita was too polite to say so, but Kit knew she was thinking that nothing like that would happen in her house, where the adults were dignified, and people were usually the right way up, however old they were.

"Hello, Mr Spencer! Mrs Spencer!" said Josh.

"Hello, Josh! Hello, Alita! See you later! Don't get muddy, Kit!" said her mum, wiping a splodge of baby food out of her auburn hair. She glanced at Kit. "Muddi*er*." Then, to Kit's dad, "The baby's been sick again. Can you pass me a wet wipe?"

Kit sometimes wondered if her parents might pay her more attention if SHE had vomit and snot streaming out of her all the time.

The Chatsworth Library was a boring-looking concrete building with automatic doors that didn't work properly, so you had to approach them and then retreat a couple of times before you could get through.

They'd never been to this library before, but the one that Josh and Alita usually went to had closed down a few months before. This looked like any other library though. Inside, the walls were covered in posters about getting flu vaccinations and rules about when you could use the computers. There was a little play area with toys for small children. Kit wished they had one of those for kids her age.

Maybe a multicoloured ball pit that you could dive into. She'd be at the library every day if they did.

"The new Danny Fandangos will be over here," said Josh, charging for the children's section.

"OK, get it quickly and then we can go to the cemetery," said Kit. The silence in the library was creepy. It made her want to shout really, really loudly.

In that moment, she caught the eye of a librarian with a long white beard, who put a finger to his lips, as if he *knew* she was going to make a noise.

Kit sighed and strolled over to her friends. They were staring at a display of books. Or rather, at an *empty* space in the centre of it.

"It's already gone!" said Alita. "*Danny Fandango and the Crown of Bones* has gone!"

"We're too late!" said Josh.

"This is the worst thing that has ever happened," said Alita. "Including when Lara Fandango's pet fox lost a leg in book two."

They both turned to Kit. "This is your fault!" said Josh.

"What? We only got here five minutes after opening time!" said Kit.

"Exactly," said Josh. "I bet people were queuing before the library opened. Probably overnight. I wish we were older so we were allowed to queue overnight."

Kit could think of a million reasons why being older would be fun, but none of them involved queuing.

"Can I help?" said a voice from behind them.

Kit turned to see a tall, dark-skinned black woman, with her hair in long locs. Her face was open and warm, with a wide nose and a full, perfectly lipsticked mouth. Her long nails were painted with squiggly, shimmering patterns.

The woman was wearing



a name tag that said “Faith Braithwaite” and underneath that “Head Librarian”.

“What are you looking for?” Faith the Head Librarian asked with a bright smile.

“The new Danny Fandango!” said Alita and Josh in unison.

Faith put her hands to her heart in a gesture of shock. “*Danny Fandango and the Crown of Bones*? Oh, no. Not being funny, but you’ve got to get up earlier in the morning if you want to get a copy of that when it arrives. People were queuing up when the library opened. All the copies will be out for at least a week now.”

Alita and Josh looked like puppies who’d just been kicked in the heart.

“A week? That’s … so long,” said Alita. Her eyes filled up with tears.

“A … week?” asked Josh, biting his lip. “But the *Crown of Bones* is only seven hundred pages long. Do people really read that slowly?”

“It’s not a race. No one gets medals for reading

quickly," said Faith.

Josh looked extra sad at that.

"Cheer up though," Faith went on. "There are other books. That's the point of this place. Read these instead."

She produced two identical books from behind her back, as though she'd been holding on to them all the time. Except that was impossible, Kit thought. Her hands had been empty moments before.

The books said *The Wizard of Earthsea* on their covers.

Josh and Alita perked up ever so slightly.

"Wizards?" said Josh, taking his copy. "Excellent!"

The librarian turned to Kit. "What about you?"

"Oh, I don't need a book." Kit pointed to her friends. "I'm just here for them. We're going to the cemetery now." But Josh and Alita had already scuttled off to a reading corner with their books.

"Never mind them," said Faith. "What kind of

story would you like?"

"I don't really like stories," said Kit.

"How do you think the stories feel, with you talking about them like that?" asked Faith.

"Sorry," mumbled Kit. Then she blinked. "Wait, stories don't have feelings."

"Don't they?" Faith raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying you're the expert on stories around here?" She tapped her Head Librarian badge. "Tell that to the badge."

"I'm not, but—"

"I'll stop you there," Faith said, holding up a finger. "You don't like stories, you say? Well, not all books are stories. Follow me." She strode through the aisles, braids bouncing, with Kit trotting to catch up behind her.

Faith stopped suddenly in front of a shelf marked "NON-FICTION". Kit bumped into her, then fell over her own feet with a THUMP. Faith looked down at her curiously.

"What do you like doing?" she asked, as Kit

scrabbled herself upright. The librarian flung out her arms in a wide gesture, taking in the entire library – or possibly the entire world. "What's your favourite thing to do? I want to pick the perfect book. Be specific. Be honest."

Kit thought about it. "I like … being outside. Burning stuff. Exploring. Danger." She looked down at herself and, thinking about Faith's "Be honest" comment, added, "Mud."

"Hmmmm," said Faith. She turned to the shelf behind her and pulled out a book with a picture of a burning town on the front called *The Great Fire of London*.

"Here, try this. There's plenty of fire, obviously, and it's about the seventeenth century, so that takes care of the mud. Everyone was muddy then. Even rich people."

Kit took the book, feeling sceptical. She thought she'd rather build a fire than read about one.

"If you don't like it, I'll give you your money back," said Faith.

"But books are free in the library," objected Kit.

"Well, isn't that great!" grinned Faith. "Later!" She gave Kit a little nod, then strode away.

Before Kit had a chance to open the book, she heard a loud click from behind the nearest shelf, making her jump.

She went to investigate. Behind the shelf was a cabinet full of books behind sliding glass doors. There was a padlock on one of the doors. It was unlocked.

She found herself sliding the glass door back. The first book that caught her eye was called *Dangerous Animals*. It was very old and very dusty. She couldn't say why, but she found herself reaching for it.

"Ow!" she yelped. The book had given Kit a tiny electric shock as she took it. *Books can tell I don't like them*, she thought glumly. *It's like how dogs can smell fear*.



She looked at the book more closely and flipped it open. On the first page was a picture of a huge snake, with a label reading "Black Mamba", and some facts about how big it was, how fast, how poisonous… *OK*, thought Kit. This book was more interesting than it looked.

Kit could've sworn she heard a hiss. She peered closer at the image of the snake. Its beady black eyes seemed huge.

She heard the hiss again.

But Kit wasn't standing in the library any more. She was in a rocky desert. In front of her, the mamba rose up on its tail, swishing from side to side, hissing.



It's about to strike, she thought. She wanted to scream. She wanted to run. But she'd just read that the mamba was too fast to run from. She stood, helpless, waiting to feel the poisonous creature's teeth sink into her…

There was a rushing sound in her ears and she found herself in the library again.

No. Not THE library. *A* library. The shelves were taller. And outside the window there was a tree.

There was a flash.

She was back in the desert. The snake was mid-strike.

Then she felt someone take her hand. She heard a muttered word. The snake's hiss was in her ears.

Then it wasn't.