

SORRY,  
NOT SORRY

# NEEDLE

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*To LJ for bringing people together  
to change this*



# CHAPTER 1

I've got my needles. I've got my wool. And now, I'm gonna knit. Some folks like to pray. Some folks like yoga. My foster mum, Annie – she's one of them yoga people. But me, I knit when I'm stressed out. Today was a big stress out. It's lucky I've got something big to knit. I mean proper big. Dinosaur big.

I don't even like dinosaurs. (Of course I haven't met no dinosaurs face to face. And most of them have faces way too high up for me to see anyway.) But some kids are obsessed with dinosaurs. They know what every dinosaur is called. Their full Latin names and everything. My little sister, Kandi, is one of those kids. I'm knitting something special, just for her.

I haven't seen Kandi for two years now. When our mum died, there wasn't no one around who

could look after both of us. Kandi went to live with her dad. But no one knew where my dad had gone and our aunty had baby twins and didn't have room for me.

So I live with Annie. I've been here for ten months now. It's the third place I've lived since me and Kandi got split up. Annie's been fostering kids like me for ages. Her parents used to foster kids too. Me and Annie get on all right. She tells me she's in it for the long term. But sometimes we have to work at our relationship, as she puts it.

Annie runs a yoga studio in an alley off the high street. She says to me, "Charlene, yoga's perfect for slowing down our minds and easing our stress."

Annie's offered me free classes any time I want. But I got my knitting to slow down my mind and help me deal with stress. I don't need to stare at other people's bums for an hour.

Annie's got a son called Blake. He's at uni, so I've got his old room. I know he's not happy with that. He wants it free for when he comes back here. Still, the third bedroom he sleeps in isn't



that small. At least he doesn't have to share like me and Kandi did until we got separated.

Last time Blake was here, Annie made him wash his own clothes, the same way I have to. I heard them arguing. Annie said, "*I'm your mother, not your slave, Blake. You know how the washing machine works.*" Blake acted like it was my fault she was making him do this, despite him seeing me unloading my clothes and hanging them out in the garden to dry.

Annie's been helping me with dinosaur research. We went to the library and found a whole load of books with pictures of dinosaurs in them. Then she found some small toy dinosaurs in an old box in a cupboard in the loft. They used to belong to Blake when he was a kid. Last week, me and Annie spent a couple of evenings watching the *Jurassic Park* films. We thought about watching the *Jurassic World* films too but didn't. Annie said that she didn't want to ruin her memory of the originals. And me, like I said, I'm just not that into dinosaurs.

But I want to make sure I get everything right for Kandi. I can't knit a real-size dinosaur. Annie hasn't got a ladder that tall nor pockets that deep to buy all that wool. I'm making my

little sister a kind of blanket that she can wrap around herself, with a dinosaur hood to pull over her head. Because, man, do you want to know another one of Kandi's favourite things? It was when we wriggled under the covers to the bottom of her bed. Then I'd use my phone torch to read her favourite dinosaur books. We even kept doing it when she could read them herself.

I miss Kandi so much.

Right now, Annie's downstairs eating dinner. I've told her I'm too stressed and I don't want nothing to eat. She says the food's waiting in the fridge for when I'm ready. I can just stick it in the microwave, but I shouldn't bring it up here to my bedroom. Annie had a foster kid a couple of years ago that stored doughnuts in the wardrobe and the place ended up full of mice.

No food. Just knitting. I need to close my eyes and feel the stitches as they slip from one needle to the other. I need the *click, click, click*.

When you're knitting, there's no silence until you finish it.

*Click, click, click.*

I hope my heart calms down soon.

*Click.*

*Click.*

*Click.*

If I knit too fast, the stitches are gonna drop and there's gonna be holes. I don't want that. If there's holes, I'll have to start again.

*Click.*

And it's working – it's slowing me down, even though I don't like the way this cheap wool feels. When I was a kid, I picked up a stone and there was a slug stuck to it. The slug fell into my hand and I screamed. The wool reminds me of that feeling, except it's not wet and slimy. My last social worker, Wanda, bought the wool for me out of her own money before she left and started training to be a teacher. I'm really grateful. I just wish it didn't feel so weird. But this is for Kandi, so I'm gonna make myself use it.

My stomach just rumbled. It's lying. I'm not hungry.

*Click, click, click, click, click.*

I'm going too fast again. I want my knitting to make me stop thinking about what happened

in that shop earlier. It's the thing that stressed me out today. Annie believes my version of the story. She's even cooked macaroni cheese for dinner because she knows it's my favourite. She wants me to feel better. Annie says that no stuck-up security guard from a make-up store is gonna make her feel bad about me. But maybe me swearing didn't help, Annie says. And she reckons it would have been much easier if I'd just said sorry.

Nuh! Why should I have said sorry? That security dude had his eyes on me from the second I walked into that shop. One minute the dude was slouching by the wire baskets; next minute it was like someone pulled a string on the top of his head and he bounced right up. I know me and my friends can be loud, but that proves we've got nothing to hide. We're not sneaking around stashing lipstick in our pockets. All our conversation was in the air for him to hear.

*Click, click, click, click, click.* Need to slow down. Need to slow down.

I'm gonna let my needles rest until my brain cools a bit. I'm not gonna let that ignorant security guard ruin Kandi's blanket too.

I had twenty pounds to spend. The first thing I was gonna buy in that shop was foundation. When I give Kandi this blanket, I want to look good. I don't want her to worry about me. My skin's a bit grey at the moment and the spots on my nose have been there for so long they should be paying me rent.

Me, Bash and Skye are all different colours, so we needed a shop that has make-up for all of us, but one where an eyeliner doesn't cost more than our trainers. Skye reckoned that the big store near the station called Spruce would be good. Apart from the security guard, it seemed all right at first. A make-up girl was sitting on a stool in front of a table of mirrors. She didn't have no customers. She smiled at us and told us to come and ask if we needed anything.

We tried out all the testers. It was fun. Especially when we tried each other's. We were joking with each other because we're pale, or dark, or midway brown. I could see the make-up girl looking confused. She was probably wondering if she should report us for being racist.

“Chaz! You gonna buy this?” Bash asked.

She showed me a bottle of foundation. No squeeze tube. This was proper glass with a screw lid. I couldn't see "Tester" written on the side, so it was the real product. I took it and shook it. The colour inside was light. It wouldn't even match the inside of my hand.

"Yeah," I said. "Get me that green Crazy Hair Dye and that red lipstick there and I'll cosplay the Joker."

I didn't mean it for real. It was jokes. I like Batman even less than I like dinosaurs. But Bash likes to push things. She grabbed a red lipstick from the tester slot. There was only a short nub of it left, like folks had been sneaking in to touch up their make-up for free.

"You better try it on then, Chaz!" Bash said.

She dived towards me. All I could think about was all the other mouths that lipstick must have touched. Stranger spit and germs all over it.

"Nuh!" I said, and moved to push Bash away. The posh foundation slipped from my hand. The smash as it hit the floor was so loud I was surprised people across the street didn't throw themselves to the ground, thinking it was a bomb.

“Man!” Skye said, looking furious. “See what you done?”

Her new white trainers were splashed with make-up, but you could barely see the difference. That foundation was so damn pale. The floor was darker though. The foundation really showed up and it looked like there was more make-up on the floor than there ever was in the bottle.

“You need to pay for that.”

It was the security guard. He was smirking, like he’d been waiting for this to happen. The make-up girl was by his side. Her face said “*Don’t worry*”. Her mouth said nothing at all. I looked for Skye and Bash. They were gone.

The thing is, I almost said sorry to the make-up girl. It was an accident, but the bottle slipped from *my* hand and smashed. Maybe the shop was gonna take it out of her wages. But I kept my mouth shut because the security guard came up so close to me I was sure I could smell what he had for lunch. I knew he wanted me to know for sure that he was taller than me.

The security guard said, “Did you hear me? You need to pay for that.”

I laughed. Not because of his comic vibes. He didn't have any. It was because I've met loads of bullies like this before. They don't know what to do if you don't act scared. I had money to pay. I might even have got a couple of pennies in change. Still, I sure as hell wasn't giving nothing to him.

I stayed exactly where I was. I knew the guard wanted me to step back and act all timid. I took a quick glance round the shop. Yeah, I was checking for escape routes but also looking for my friends.

I saw Skye. She was pressing her nose against the shop window outside. She grinned and waved like all this was still jokes. Bash wasn't nowhere. Her parents don't like her hanging out with us. They think me and Skye are trouble. When crap like this happens, it's like it proves her parents right.

An older white lady had appeared by my side. "I saw everything!" she said. She was wearing a hot-pink tracksuit and had an owl tattooed on her wrist. I sort of wished she was my social worker. "It was an accident, wasn't it, love?"



I nodded. I didn't dash their posh make-up to the ground on purpose. Anyone could see that.

The security guard hit the white lady with a stink-eye. "So will *you* pay for it, madam?" he asked.

My new friend seemed to make herself taller. Seriously, I'm sure I heard her calf muscles stretch when she was doing it. She and the security guard were eye to eye. I hoped both of them had good spit control or they'd be splattering each other's faces when they talked.

"Don't be ridiculous," the lady said. "You have insurance for that. I'm sure that if I'd dropped it, you wouldn't be so harsh."

A crowd gathered round us. I could see folks looking all confused. The security guard was as Black as me. They couldn't understand why he should be treating me different. But the world doesn't always unroll all smooth. When you're a Black girl in care, there's bumps and twists.

"An accident?" the security guard said, laughing. "She isn't even sorry."

The lady smiled down at me and said, "Of course you are, love, aren't you?"

I looked at her and the waiting crowd. I glanced outside at Skye and down at the pale make-up and smashed glass on the floor. It would be easy. All I had to do was say that word.

“No,” I said. “It wasn’t my fault and I’m not sorry.”