

YES!

(Nikki)

I was extremely nervous during the interview and my hands were shaking so badly that I had to hide them under the table. In the beginning, I could barely speak. Mr Saunders, the owner of the garage, waited for me and eventually I managed to tell him that I wanted the apprenticeship more than anything I'd ever wanted in my life. He nodded then. He studied my resume for a long time, and commented that I'd done a lot of automotive classes at school. He also seemed interested in my preparatory apprenticeship course that I'm now doing at TAFE.

Mr Saunders told me that he'd let me know sometime early next week. I wanted to ask whether that meant Monday or Tuesday but as he was already walking me out the door, I just thanked him and left.

However, it was only a couple of hours later when he rang and told me that I had the job.

'YES!' I bellowed at the top of my lungs, after I'd hung up the phone. I leapt onto my bed, kicking off all the pillows, and began jumping up and down. I imagined pulling engines apart in the garage, with a whole heap of tools at my disposal, and learning how to operate the wheel alignment machine and commercial tuning apparatus. My head permanently under the bonnet of a car, or a chassis. Finally my dream was actually going to come true.

Suddenly the bed made a slight cracking noise, reminding me that I'm no longer the weight of a kid and so I decided to walk into the sitting room to share my news with the parents. As to be expected, they were the exact opposite of enthusiastic.

'You've got an apprenticeship, Nicole? You do know that you'll have to stick at it for four whole years, don't you?'

Go Dad.

‘Yes, but it’s what I want to do,’ I told him, although I wasn’t sure why I was bothering.

‘You’ll have to go to school as part of your apprenticeship. And we all know how much you hate studying, Nikki.’

Go Mum.

‘Trade school is different. I enjoy learning when it’s about cars.’

My mother turned away from me to face my father. ‘Perhaps,’ she said, ‘in a year’s time, they’ll move her out of the garage and into the office.’

It was times like these that made me wonder who the hell these two people were, and often they looked at me as if I’d just arrived from another planet. Maybe that’s how it always is with adopted children – they never manage to belong with their new family.

I was adopted when I was just a baby, very soon after I’d been born. Apparently, my birth mother was a sixteen-year-old girl who couldn’t afford to keep me. My parents couldn’t have children of their own and so for ages they’d been on an adoption waiting list. One day, completely out-of-the-blue, they received a call from Matron Robinson and straight away were presented with a baby. Me. Talk about pass the parcel.

So now I’m stuck with these people who pretend to be my parents, and they’re none too happy about the situation either. Ever since I got caught stealing lollies from the local shop, the old man has grumbled about ‘defective genes’ and ‘bad blood’. Can there really be good and bad bloodlines for people, like there are for horses? Does this mean that I’m never going to win the Melbourne Cup? I have to admit that it had its funny side.

Yet when I ended up in Juvenile Court at fourteen for joy-riding in a stolen car with my boyfriend, nobody even came close to cracking a smile. Dad complained bitterly that it had cost him good money to adopt me. So what did he want – a bloody refund? I explained to him a million times that I didn’t know that the car was hot but he never believed me. This made me so angry that I felt like going straight out and pinching a car from right under his very nose.

Anyway, I thought happily to myself, from now on I'll be spending all of my time fixing cars, and getting paid for it! I whistled, and then whistled again. My dog finally appeared from the direction of the kitchen, blinking. He's such a sleepy-head, and always has been. I got him when I was a little kid, on the day that I was diagnosed with measles. The doctor instructed me 'to take Panadol and rest up in bed', which is exactly what I did. Since then, Panadol has never failed to make me feel a whole heap better, whatever the problem, although I do sometimes wish that he didn't leave his dirty pawprints on my doona.

With Panadol now awake and trotting behind me, I went outside and dragged the tarp off the car that I'm fixing, a Ford Falcon XB. The Beast stood there in all his shining glory. When I opened the passenger side door, Panadol jumped in and immediately lay down on the seat. He knew the routine. I got in the other side and decided not to turn on the radio – the last time we'd spent a fair amount of time in the car, we'd flattened the battery. So we sat there in complete silence as darkness fell, while I made a list in my head of all the tools I was going to borrow from the garage. Panadol, of course, entertained himself by snoozing.

The minute Jess saw the expression on my face the next day, she guessed what had happened. She hugged me and began firing questions.

'So when do you start?'

'Monday week.'

'What time?'

'Seven in the morning – now that's going to hurt! But I'll manage.'

'How are you going to get there?'

'Train, unless you want to drop over every day and drive me?'

'In your dreams.'

'Actually, knowing the way you drive, it'd be in my nightmares!'

We both chuckled.

Suddenly Jess looked serious. 'Hang on a minute,' she said. 'Does this mean that I won't be seeing your ugly mug around here anymore?'