

The Road Trip Agreement



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Chapter 1

Coral

“THERE WOULD BE A SIGN if people have died doing this, right?” Coral asked.

On the ground beside her, her camera’s red LED blinked.

She hadn’t planned to free-fall into a river today, but as she teetered on a muddy bank with her career on the line, it was the only thing to do.

Career was a loose description of what this was, of course. Being a YouTube creator paid, but her parents were keen to tell her it wasn’t a real job, and it definitely didn’t earn her enough income to live on.

Yet.

After a year of posting daily videos, she had enough data to know the adventurous ones got the most views. This wasn’t just a rope swing—it was an opportunity.

“Don’t do what I’m doing,” she said by way of a disclaimer. “The thing with water is that no matter how beautiful and calm it looks, there can be a lot going on beneath the surface—rocks, logs, currents...”

The waterfall roared, close enough to coat her skin in mist, filling the swimming hole with glacier runoff. To be safe, she grabbed a branch and dropped it over the cliff. It fell for an uncomfortably long time before plunging in. After a second, it bobbed back to the surface and floated gently onward.

“There doesn’t seem to be an undertow, and I checked for rocks before climbing up.” Her voice was steady, and she flashed the camera her best smile—but inside, her pulse raced. “Ready to jump with me?”

Coral grabbed her GoPro for the extra point-of-view footage. With it safely in a waterproof case and the selfie stick awkwardly between her fingers, she wrapped her hands around the rope. It was grimy, rough, and smelled like the sweat of a thousand show-offs.

After one more deep breath, she backed up as far as the rope permitted. Palms sweating, she gripped tightly, double-checking that both cameras were recording.

She pushed off and swung over the water. As she soared through the air, weightless, the sense of freedom lifted her into the clouds.

She let out an exhilarated whoop.

This was why she'd chosen this life. It was the middle of a Wednesday, and most people were working at their office jobs while she soared through the air in a Pacific Northwest oasis.

Then the water stabbed her every pore, cold enough to be painful.

When she surfaced with a gasp, a dad and daughter picnicking at the river's edge applauded her.

Coral laughed. "Thanks."

She was grateful they were here. If she'd been alone, she wouldn't have jumped. She was all about adventure, not recklessness—for the most part.

Shivering, she sat on the bank beneath the rope and wrapped a towel around her shoulders.

"Okay, that was awesome." She smiled, adding pep for the camera. "The water's an ice bath, if you're into that. I'll share my GPS track on Patreon."

She untied her braid and shook out her blond hair to let the early summer heat dry it. Then she spun the camera to capture the scenery. "Look at this place. How lucky are we to call this home today?"

Everything was lush and bright, from the evergreens towering overhead to the moss on the boulders around the waterfall. The cold mist purified the air, and she breathed deeper to savor it. Hopefully, the microphone picked up the birdsong beneath the rushing water.

Why couldn't her parents understand how important this lifestyle was to her? This was more than a job. She was free to do whatever she wanted and to try new things every day. Recording and sharing her life was fun, and the fact that people paid her for it was a bonus.

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She had zero interest in being part of a capitalist, forty-hour-a-week, work-till-you're-dead society.

Except life was getting more expensive, and Vancouver was one of the most expensive cities in the world. She had no desire to move away from her sister and friends, but the longer she tried to live this life, the harder it became to afford food and gas. Her parents might have had a point, but she wasn't ready to give up. Aunt Nina managed to live the life of her dreams—she was in Costa Rica now, probably zip-lining with a sloth or something epic—and if she could do it, then Coral could too.

She smiled. "Time to pack up and head back to the van. I've got a deep-dish pizza waiting for me in the slow cooker."

She turned off the camera, ready to hike back.

After pulling her running pants and compression tank over her damp bikini, she looked up to find the picnicking girl staring at her while her dad rummaged in a cooler. She must have been in her mid-teens.

Coral heaved on her backpack. "Gonna try the rope swing?"

"Are you on YouTube?" the girl asked.

"I am."

The girl crossed her arms and gave her dad a pointed look. "See, Dad?"

He opened his mouth as if to scold her and shot Coral a disapproving glance. "Yes, Avery, but she's probably doing this for fun while she goes to school."

Avery had a desperate look in her eyes that was all too familiar.

"I'm not going to school," Coral said. "And my parents didn't want me to do this either. We made a deal. What niche do you want to get into, Avery?"

The dad shifted, glancing between the two of them. The point of Coral's channel was to prove to herself and others that you didn't have to live according to anyone else's agenda. If Avery wanted to be a creator, then she should go for it.

"Um, fashion." Avery blushed. "I make my own clothes."

"You do?" Coral studied Avery's outfit, an adorable periwinkle tank top with a big bow in the back. "You made that?"

Avery nodded with a nervous glance at her dad.

“It’s really good.” Then, so as not to come across as a total ass trying to undermine someone’s parenting, she said to the dad, “It takes work to build an audience, but you might be surprised at the income that’s possible online. Being an artist can be a good career.”

The dad’s brow pinched. “What deal did you make with your parents?”

Coral fidgeted with the strap of her camera. “I live in a converted van full-time, and they bought it for me to get me started. I wrote a business plan, and we agreed that by the time I turn twenty-four, I need to be earning thirty grand a year. If not, I’ll sell the van and work for them.”

“Thirty grand?” the dad asked. “You’re making thirty thousand dollars a year doing this?”

Coral’s insides twisted with something between panic and shame. “Not yet.”

His lips tightened into an infuriatingly smug smile. “Your parents set high expectations.”

“They own an auto repair franchise, and my older sister’s in business school.”

“And you didn’t want to take up the family business?”

Coral shook her head. She’d seen enough of it growing up, the way her parents worked to exhaustion with endless overtime. Farrah was headed down the same path by going to business school. She’d set her sights on a marketing firm and had already completed an internship that involved staying late every Friday. Why would Coral want that?

“How much longer do you have before you turn twenty-four?” Avery asked.

Coral’s insides hollowed out. “A month.”

“Do you think you can do it?”

She appreciated Avery’s hopeful tone, but it was unlikely. She was going to give it everything she had, starting with today’s epic hiking video, but the fact was that she was only pulling in four hundred a month. No matter how she graphed it, she was so far off thirty thousand that she would need a miracle in order to win the bargain in time.

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“Did your dad fix up the van for you through his business?” the dad asked.

Coral bristled. “My parents got a cheap one for me through *their* business, and I put in a new transmission and did the whole build myself.”

“Oh.” The dad glanced at his daughter, his face reddening. “Good for you. That’s really good.”

“Thank you.”

There was a beat of silence. Coral stepped toward the trail.

“What’s your YouTube channel?” Avery asked.

Coral smiled. “Coral Lavoie Adventures. I’ll keep an eye open for Fashion by Avery?”

Avery smiled.

A ghost of a smile crossed the dad’s face. “We’ll see what kind of deal we can come up with.”

Two hours later, when Coral arrived back in the parking lot, she waved to a couple of women who’d set up camp across from her in a teardrop trailer. They had a tripod set up and were obviously in the middle of taking pictures.

“Good hike?” one asked.

Coral wiped the sweat beading down her temples. “Beautiful! There’s a rope swing at the end.”

“Ooh!” They turned to each other in excitement, launching into a plan to head up later.

Trembling from hunger, Coral cleared a spot on the cluttered counter for her camera and recorded herself taking the pizza out of the slow cooker. Pesto, goat cheese, peppers, kale, artichokes, sun-dried tomatoes, and assorted mushrooms. *Yum.*

“Mm, this looks and smells amazing.” She took a bite, struggling not to make moaning sounds and devour it like a Neanderthal. “Wow. That’s incredible. I’ll share the link to the recipe. Let me know if you try making it.”

She wolfed down a few more bites, intending to cut these few seconds out of the video. The hike was longer than anticipated, and she’d never been good at packing her bag properly.

“Anyway, that’s it for me today. Tomorrow I’ve got to pick up a new heating and cooling unit I ordered online. It’ll be nice to get some AC in here. Thank you for watching, and thank you to my Patreon supporters. If you like this video, please give it a big thumbs-up and hit that subscribe button. See you tomorrow for another adventure!”

She turned off the camera and shoved an indecently huge bite of pizza in her mouth. Cheese and pesto oozed everywhere, deliciously satisfying. Then she got to work on editing the day’s footage.

This video had better do numbers. As much as she hated to do it, she should probably feature a screenshot from the few minutes when she was in a bikini. Time was running out, and she needed to pull out all the stops if she wanted more subscribers.

Was there really only one month left before she had to present a financial report to her parents? Ugh. Thirty more videos didn’t seem like enough. How was she supposed to translate her twenty-thousand-strong following into more income in that time? Losing her deal with her parents and losing this van was not an option.

She kicked off her hiking shoes and leaned back on the bench seat, shoving piles of clothes and blankets out of the way. This van was her comfort, her home, her life. Listing it for sale would be like ending a friendship.

There must be some way she could get more followers, more views, and more paying subscribers. Should she find more interesting locations? Do something dangerous? Create drama?

The answer was hiding somewhere. One way or another, she would find a way to keep living the life of her dreams.

Chapter 2

Ruby

“WELCOME TO INTENTIONAL LIVING WITH Ruby Hayashi,” Ruby said in her most mellow, soothing camera voice. “Tonight, we’re making vegan chickpea stew with coconut rice, and we’ll serve that with fresh garlic naan I got from Pike Place Market.”

Standing at the kitchenette of her camper van, Ruby prepared the ingredients carefully, making sure each shot was perfect before moving on. The mic was positioned to catch every tiny sound, the camera so close that she had to use the knife with her elbow pinched against her side. Three ring lights illuminated the scene from every angle.

With the onion, garlic, ginger, turmeric, red pepper flakes, and chickpeas sizzling in her rose gold stockpot, Ruby held the camera and microphone as close as she dared to capture the sight and sound of the wooden spoon mashing the chickpeas.

“Add the coconut milk—” The words came out too fast, so she drew a breath, took a sip of water, and tried again in a warmer, smoother tone. “Add the coconut milk and vegetable broth to the pot, then simmer until it thickens. It should take about thirty minutes.”

While the curry simmered, she captured close-up footage of her home. She misted her herb garden while it swayed in a breeze that rolled through the window. She recorded Calvin curled on the bed, repositioning the dog’s ears for maximum cuteness. Calvin didn’t move, accustomed to her fussing. It was his price to pay for being ridiculously photogenic, with his light cream coloring and big, expressive eyes. His boxy head and chunky build indicated some

kind of pit bull-Labrador mix, though Ruby couldn't be sure without ordering one of those dog DNA tests.

She aimed the camera out the door, adjusted the exposure, and got a gorgeous shot of the Seattle skyline across the water. Trees rustled, and there was the distant sound of campers laughing and enjoying themselves. The evening was perfect.

Perfect, but not good enough, she thought, the words as intrusive as a mosquito buzzing in her ear.

Her stomach churned as she returned to the stove. Her audience had been complaining that she was filming from the same spot all week, but she wasn't about to explain to them why she hadn't moved the van. They came to her channel for a stress-free experience.

Anyway, she should have enough money to fix the transmission within a month or two. She just had to keep her subscribers happy and engaged until then.

She prepared Calvin's dinner and filmed him eating it. His meals were fit for a prince, full of raw, ethically sourced animal proteins, fresh fruits and vegetables, and vitamin powder. He ate slowly, always savoring his meals—kind of like Ruby did. When he was done, she followed him with the camera while he sniffed around the campsite. Her audience demanded at least a few minutes of Calvin footage in each video, and she tended to face a riot in her comment section if she didn't show enough of him.

Their love for her best friend warmed her like hot tea. He deserved his personal fan club. She'd adopted him from a shelter after starting her life in the van at twenty-two—already three years ago—and his loyalty was like nothing she'd ever experienced. He was cuddly, playful, smart, and a great bodyguard for this solo life she'd chosen. His past was a mystery, but the way he flinched at sudden movements and avoided strangers made it clear that people hadn't been nice to him. Ruby had been determined from day one to make up for that tenfold. So what if he was suspicious of strangers and tended to growl at men? Ruby had no men in her life and probably never would, and she preferred not to have random strangers come up to her anyway. As far as she was concerned, she and Calvin were soulmates.

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She returned her attention to the simmering chickpea stew, which smelled mouthwatering. She added a couple of handfuls of spinach and let it wilt before serving it over steaming rice and naan.

Before digging in, she spent several minutes getting the perfect lighting for the featured photo.

It was delectable and still hot by the time she started eating it, which wasn't always a guarantee for her meals.

"I'd call this recipe a success," she said to the camera. "Thank you for watching, and please visit my Patreon page for this recipe and other extra content. If you like this video, please like and subscribe. As always, leave a comment if you find a great recipe I should try. Keep living with intention, and I'll see you next time."

She smiled, turned off the camera, and looked at Calvin. "Thanks for being such a quiet boy while I was filming. Want dessert?"

She grabbed Calvin's cookie jar while he gazed at her with big, glossy eyes that reflected the string lights on the ceiling. Whenever he looked at her with such awe, she imagined him wishing he had opposable thumbs so that he, too, could open cookie jars.

After she ate and filmed the cleanup, she gathered her journal, tripod, and Calvin, and headed down to the beach to capture footage of the lapping waves.

Annie and Parm were there, YouTuber friends who'd come to this campground on her recommendation. They were a couple in their late twenties who lived in a converted ambulance, and they'd glommed onto Ruby last year after she helped them dig their vehicle out of deep snow.

She didn't mind meeting up with them once in a while. Though she preferred camping solo, it was nice to know people in the vanlife community.

"What up, Rubes?" Parm asked.

"Probably doing the same thing you are." She held up her tripod. "Calvin, go play."

Calvin trotted into the waves to stand chest-deep and look for fish.

Annie made a zipper motion over her lips and gestured for Ruby to go ahead with the video.

“It’s okay. I’ve got time.” Ruby sighed, plunking next to them on the driftwood.

Sometimes, recording every minute of the day was tiring. It was why she’d started recording only in the evenings, giving herself the rest of the day to turn off the camera and live. She still caught herself thinking about interesting shots during the day.

“Did you film today?” she asked.

Annie nodded. “We didn’t set up our new fridge properly, so we had a lot of spoiled food to deal with.”

“And a mouse got in through a hole in the floor, so we had to patch that up,” Parm added.

“Dang,” Ruby said. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Annie said brightly. “It made for a dramatic video.”

The thing with Annie and Parm was that they always seemed to be in a disaster. Usually, it was an avoidable disaster. Ruby had to stop watching their channel last winter for the sake of her stress levels, when they’d posted a video of them getting stuck in a snowstorm without snow tires, chains, a shovel, or even proper insulation in their vehicle.

But the conflict earned them a lot of views, and she had to admire their willingness to share all of it on a public platform.

Ruby smiled. “Sometimes, I wonder if I should make my video style more like yours.”

“What, a constant shitshow?” Parm asked.

“Just...open. Truthful.”

Ruby’s style was obviously successful—she had one of the most popular vanlife pages on YouTube and had gotten awards for it—but sometimes, it felt like she was lying to her audience. Like, she couldn’t talk about her broken van and money stresses because that would ruin the perfect image she’d created. She’d worked hard to create all of her videos in the Japanese style she used to watch with Dad—simple, minimalist, aesthetically pleasing, with long silences to give people time to appreciate the views. Her channel was a place people could come to escape everyday life, to get cozy in a camper van, cuddle up with a sweet rescue dog, and eat delicious, ethical comfort food. Chaos

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and mechanical failures had no place here. Not in the van, not on her channel, not in her brain.

“You know, Rubes, I don’t think anyone’s online presence is fully honest,” Parm said. “Like, you don’t get into the challenges of living off-grid, but we make a big deal out of minor things all the time for the sake of views. Nobody on social media is truthful all the time. It’s just the way it works.”

“I guess.”

Still, Annie and Parm’s subscriber count wasn’t dropping. They didn’t get comments calling their videos monotonous.

Was Ruby’s method of telling half the truth failing her? Should she change her approach?

Annie squinted suspiciously. “Are you having a platform identity crisis?”

“Maybe a little.” Ruby rubbed her hands over her face. “Are my videos getting boring?”

Annie and Parm gaped at her.

“Girl, you’re approaching a million subscribers,” Annie said. “Nobody thinks you’re boring.”

“But I’ve been posting the same type of video every day for three years. Should I do something new?”

“Not if it’s working,” Parm said.

“Hm.” That was exactly the problem. It wasn’t working anymore. Something about her channel was failing to attract new viewers, which was detrimental because this was her only source of income.

And with the van’s transmission sounding like a wrench got stuck in a blender, she needed more income *badly*.

But how could she get more subscribers and views? Should she start dumping her problems onto her audience and calling it conflict?

No. She wasn’t ready to get personal on camera. The invisible wall between herself and her audience was nice.

Maybe she just had to embrace something different. There must be a new angle she could take in her videos, right?

“Anyway, we haven’t made dinner yet, so we’ll let you make a video before it gets too dark,” Annie said, patting her boyfriend’s knee.

“Yeah, and I’ve got to fix the frying pan first,” Parm said. “The handle broke off this morning.”

“Oh. I forgot about that.”

They stood.

“Have fun,” Ruby said.

“By the way, we’re going kayaking tomorrow, if you want to come,” Annie said. “There’s supposed to be a pod of orcas in the area, and we want to see if we can find them.”

“At a respectful distance,” Parm added.

Ruby smiled. “Thanks. I’ll see how I feel tomorrow.”

She probably wouldn’t—and they probably knew that. She wasn’t a good swimmer and had never been the type to hop in a kayak and track down killer whales. Plus, did she trust their kayaks not to have holes in the bottom?

While they retreated to their campsite, Calvin stared at her from the waves with his head down and his tail wagging slowly.

“Oh, I know that look.” Ruby stood, leaving the camera on the ground. “You want a piece of me?”

Calvin bowed into a play stance, and for a moment, they stared at each other, frozen.

She crouched abruptly, and he exploded, zipping over the shoreline in a burst of energy.

A laugh bubbled up inside Ruby as her pup zoomed in a wide circle, barking. He became a blur of paws, a lolling tongue, and flapping ears.

This life was everything she wanted, and she couldn’t let it go. She had Calvin, friends, nature, and she could park her house wherever she pleased.

Now, if only she could figure out how to keep her channel alive so she could keep living this way.

Chapter 3

Coral

CORAL PARKED IN KITSILANO AT NOON, where the beach was packed and volleyball games were underway. She slid open the side door, bringing her audience through every step.

“I’m meeting up with my sister, Farrah, for some beach time today. She goes to UBC, so Kits Beach is our usual spot.” She turned the camera to give her audience a view of the busy grass area, footpath, and the sandy beach beyond it.

“Coral!”

Across the street, Farrah strode out of Starbucks.

Coral waved. “There she is!”

Farrah held up two iced coffees and did a happy dance through the crosswalk. She wore jean shorts and a white tee with a neon-green bikini top visible through the thin material. Her blond hair was mostly roots as it swung in a high ponytail—she hadn’t had much time for things like haircuts and self-care during this final year of university.

“I would’ve bought them!” Coral said as she accepted her drink.

“It’s fine. I won a gift card at a department fundraiser last weekend.”

“Nice. Thanks.”

“So you want my advice, huh? Come here for some of my genius business school wisdom—”

“Okay, let’s not get carried away,” Coral said teasingly. She shut off the camera, intending to leave out the real reason why she was meeting her sister today. As far as her viewers needed to know, they were just hanging out.

They found a spot on the grass and flopped down on the blanket. Coral lay on her stomach in her bikini top, intending to multitask and work on her tan. Farrah did the same, lamenting how pale she was because she had no time for the outdoors. Around them, the smells of everyone's barbecues mingled, and so did their music. A few guys were playing catch dangerously close to people's heads.

Coming into the city was nice, but sometimes, it was a little crowded. It reaffirmed Coral's decision to live on wheels.

"So." Coral opened her laptop. "Help. I need money by the end of the month or else I owe Mom and Dad a van."

"You're liking nomad life, then?" Farrah lifted her sunglasses to the top of her head, revealing the bags under her eyes. She looked more worn down every time Coral saw her—but thankfully, the stresses of school hadn't quashed her bright personality.

"Definitely."

"Not surprised. Remember when you spent a weekend living in the treehouse?"

Coral laughed. "Remember when you turned your bedroom into a store and made us all buy snacks and books from you?"

"Living our destinies."

Coral let her head fall forward so her nose pressed into the blanket. "Now, if only my destiny involved earning an income."

Farrah tugged the laptop closer. "I can help you look at your finances and do some marketing, but I honestly don't know how much help I'll be. There's no *hashtag-vanlife* class in my program."

Coral lifted her head. "That's fine. I just need someone to brainstorm with."

"What are your streams of income?"

"YouTube, Patreon, affiliate links, merch, ad revenue..."

"Can you show me what other vanlifers are doing? Who are the best ones?"

There were a few options for the most popular channels, but one came to mind first. She'd been catching Coral's attention for a while, both as an idol and a nemesis, depending on whether Coral was feeling inspired or jealous that day.

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“Ruby Hayashi’s channel does really well.” Coral navigated to her YouTube page. “Hers is a lot different from mine, but she focuses on the minimalist angle. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her go on a hike.”

She clicked the featured video, and Ruby’s gorgeous face filled the frame. Coral’s stomach did a weird twisty thing as a familiar mix of admiration and envy filled her. On top of being stunningly beautiful, Ruby was a genius when it came to building her platform. She was also fun and interesting to watch, and apparently, she was a great cook. What *didn’t* she have?

Farrah reached forward to brighten the laptop screen. “Hot damn, look at that van.”

“I know,” Coral said begrudgingly.

Ruby’s van was the same type as hers—a bed at the back, kitchen on one side, bench and dinette on the other, lots of cupboards and drawers for maximum storage space. Having watched Ruby’s van tour, Coral also knew there was a toilet tucked away under the bed—a luxury worth having—and no shower, which meant she also relied on campgrounds and gyms for hygiene. Their vans’ similarities ended there. Their layout was mirrored, so entering from the side door, Coral faced the bench, while Ruby faced the kitchen. Their choice of interior design was also different. Coral’s was geared toward practicality, with a roof rack on top for a paddle board and a lot of hiking gear everywhere. Ruby’s was about the aesthetic, all cream colors with wood accents, cute succulents on the wall, a fruit net, woven baskets to hold everything, rose gold knobs, fairy lights, and a chic black geometric pattern on the white bed linens.

“Do I make my van more like hers?” Coral asked, frustrated by the idea of redoing her interior.

Farrah tilted her head. “You know your market better than I do, but the way you’ve positioned yourself, I’m sure your audience values practicality over aesthetics.”

“Yeah. That’s true. But if it’s not about aesthetics, what does Ruby Hayashi have that I don’t?”

Farrah clicked on Ruby’s About page and pointed to the date. “She’s been doing this longer than you, for starters.”

“But she didn’t start posting daily videos until recently. I’ve got more content out of the gate.”

Farrah clicked on her latest video. “On first impression, she’s also got a lot more finesse than you.”

Coral opened her mouth to argue, but she couldn’t deny it. Ruby’s videos were flawless. Her production was meticulous—the lighting, the dishes she used, her choice of music, the video transitions, and a million other things.

“What software do you think she uses?” Coral asked.

“That might not be relevant. She’s got a blueprint for success. Look at the way she moves, even. It’s pleasing to the eye.”

It certainly was. Ruby was born to be in front of a camera, with her shapely lips, distinct cheekbones, dark eyes, and long, silky black hair. She was slim and graceful, moving around the kitchenette with the poise of a ballerina. Her voice was like warm butter, and she’d probably taken professional voiceover lessons.

“Also, she has a cute dog,” Farrah said. “Look at that smooshy face!”

“Calvin.” Coral gave a wistful sigh. The dog definitely drew people to her channel. His giant eyes, floppy little ears, and big smile made Coral miss Oliver, the Labrador they grew up with.

“I guess I could try to copy what Ruby does,” Coral said, unconvinced. “It’ll be the combination of everything that makes her so successful, right? Bright lights, rose gold, plants, soothing voice, cute dog, artistic close-ups—”

“But that isn’t you. I think you need to stay true to yourself.”

“Then what should I do? How do I get that many followers”—she pointed to the screen— “while living in *my* van and going on hikes instead of cooking perfect meals?”

They lay in silence while everyone played catch and had obnoxious barbecues around them. It was hard to think with so many people encroaching on her space.

She opened a new tab. “Let me show you a few other channels, and we can figure out a pattern.”

They watched more videos, coming to no conclusions, before Farrah stopped her. “Here’s an idea. Remember when Mom and Dad

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partnered with a marketing firm to get their business name out? Maybe you could consider reinvesting some of your income into marketing the same way they did. Ads and publicity.”

Coral hummed. “I don’t know if ads would work.”

“How do others promote their channels? Could you get on someone’s podcast?”

Coral sat up and crossed her legs, Farrah’s words sparking an idea. “Hey, what if I partnered up with someone who has a bigger audience? Other creators team up sometimes. They show up in each other’s videos, take road trips together, promote each other’s channels... I can find someone who’s willing to do cross-promotion.”

Farrah’s eyebrows shot up. “Ooh, that’s good.”

“The question is, who? I should find someone who has a similar audience to mine, right?”

“Or the opposite.”

Coral squinted at her. “Really? Why?”

“You have your niche cornered, so see if you can corner a different one. You need a new audience.”

“Okay. See, this is why I need you.” Coral flipped through the dozens of open browser tabs. One creator stood out above all the others, and she always had. She was more talented, charismatic, beautiful, and, yes, more popular. Partnering up with her would be any creator’s dream.

Coral’s heart fluttered at the prospect of emailing her. It would be a long shot.

“I’ll message Ruby.” Heat rose in her face at the boldness of her words.

“Ruby? This Ruby?” Farrah pointed at the screen.

Her surprise didn’t help Coral’s confidence.

Yeah, I know she’s way out of my league. But why not try?

“I mean, she’ll say no,” Coral said modestly, “but I have to start with someone, right?”

“Well, she would definitely give you a boost in exposure...” Farrah made a face that might have been a doubtful grimace.

Footsteps stopped beside them. They froze.

“Can I interest you two in a barbecue?” He was a tall, broad-shouldered Asian guy with more abs than seemed possible and not a single hair on his chest. He motioned behind him, where about a dozen guys and two women in their mid-twenties were hanging around a folding table covered in food.

“H-hi,” Farrah said breathlessly and then seemed to catch herself. She dipped her chin toward her shoulder and flashed a cheeky smile. “Throw in some drinks and I’m sold.”

He smiled and stood taller. “Cool.”

Coral gave a little cough, and Farrah cast her a guilty glance.

“I mean—we’re busy with something, but maybe in a few?”

The guy nodded. “For sure. We’ll be here.”

Farrah watched him go wistfully.

“You’re drooling,” Coral murmured, clicking on Ruby’s About page.

Farrah swatted her.

Coral nudged her back. “Almost done here, and then we can go say hi.”

“It’s fine if you don’t want to. I don’t want to torture you.”

“Maybe one of them has a gay sister.”

“That’ll be our opening line when we go over.”

Coral laughed. She made it to Ruby’s page and paused, her heart jumping.

“Here’s a question,” Farrah said. “I get why it would help your channel to partner up with Ruby Hayashi. But what does she get out of it? What’s your pitch to her?”

Coral plucked at a loose thread on the blanket. “It would be... fun?”

Farrah rolled over to tan her front and pulled her sunglasses down. “You’re good at a lot of things, and I think making business proposals is one of them. It’s why you’re here right now instead of at university like Mom and Dad intended.”

“You think I should send her a business proposal?”

“She’s obviously smart and good at what she does. I think the best way to catch her attention is to make sure she sees your value.”

Coral nodded. “Okay. That’s a good idea.”

The Road Trip Agreement

Her gaze locked onto an email address on Ruby's page.

For business inquiries.

This qualified.

Farah angled her face toward Coral and opened her eyes. "Sis, I have full faith in you, and I think you'll figure out how to keep living in a van if that's what you want. But say you decide..." She trailed off, apparently searching for the right words.

"You're wondering what I'll do if I can't manage to make enough money from this."

"Yeah." Farrah pursed her lips, looking a little guilty. "Do you have a backup plan?"

"I'll start thinking about one if things don't pick up." Coral searched her sister's face. Seeing Farrah go through university gave her zero motivation to do that herself.

"You don't have to jump into a forever career immediately. You can do whatever feels right for now until a new job speaks to you."

Coral nodded. "For now, I like what I'm doing. I might be a little broke, but I'm happy. I have freedom. I go on a different adventure every day. That's worth more to me right now."

"And what about a side hustle? Freelancing? Selling crafts on Etsy?"

Coral shook her head. She'd considered other sources of income, but everything took up valuable time that could be spent building her vanlife platform. "I want to put all of my time and effort into my channel. This is my calling."

Farah hesitated. "Okay."

Coral squinted at her, not sure how to interpret the hesitation. Did Farah really believe in her, or was she just saying she did?

"University is worth it in the end," Farrah said. "It's a few years of hard work, but you end up with a good job with a good salary."

"In an office."

"Office jobs have good perks and benefits."

"I don't want—" Coral huffed, trying to get the edge out of her voice. "I'll think about it."

Farah let out a breath too. They were both getting defensive—and maybe Coral had taken a few shots at her sister's life path.

"You could get into a trade," Farrah said.

“Just drop it, okay? I’m focusing on this right now. I’ll make a backup plan later.”

Farrah fell silent, closing her eyes and continuing to work on her tan.

Coral copied Ruby’s email address.

“You can go over and say hi to those guys now,” Coral said. “I’ll be over in a minute.”

Farrah sat up and fixed her hair. “Sounds good. Do I look okay?”

Coral pretended to be repulsed. “Ew. Did you have an allergic reaction to something?”

Farrah elbowed her and stood up.

While she strode over to the guys, Coral opened a new email. With a nervous flutter in her chest, she pasted in Ruby’s address and began typing.

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THE ROAD TRIP AGREEMENT

BY TIANA WARNER

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