

Kaito only stopped overclocking his lungs when the strings unwrapped from his wrists.

He tumbled into the snow – they'd taken a little longer to release his heels. *No major injuries, somehow*, Constitution reported. Kaito wanted to be grateful, and he was gonna be, just as soon as that mouth of his came unsewed.

Any minute now.

Tanner picked that moment of realization to poke his head out from his own spot in the snow. A spherical glob of the white stuff clung to his nose, making him look like a clown. He looked at Kaito, and Kaito looked at him, and *is this how I'm going to communicate from now on?*

He'd finally grown numb enough to the Animal's pointless circling not to freeze his own eyes off with his tears or something. That would be impolite, and not in the way he felt Tanner deserved. Tanner. Tanner had said he could do this. The Animal seethed through gritted teeth. If *that bitch* hadn't sewn him shut-

*Oh, but it's your fault, too*, said Room-Reading. *You wanted to believe him.*

<It has become very clear,> Tanner said, <that I have messed up.>

Kaito tried to kill Tanner with his glare.

<...should we go back and->

*CRASH.* Down came a plane from **DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT AIRLINES**, the logo of which was clearly visible to both agents in big, red, flaming letters.

Then Tanner had his first good idea since Kaito'd crossed his wretched path: <Let's just go home.>

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There's a metal bar down my throat, and it's cold. Something in my hands is hungry. I stare at the envelope and its hidden treasure: cold, hard cash.

*Is this okay?* Signs point to no. Even in the script, this is someone else's bonus, the waitress I replaced and was mistaken for. Out here in reality, I can see the string tying this windfall to the bank account it came from – an account already in the red.

I separate the glued flap from the paper as carefully as I can (I end up ripping it anyway), and open the envelope like it'll jump out and drag me to Hell. And it does, in a way – inside is five hundred dollars, and suddenly signs are pointing to yes.

*I need this money*, I tell myself. Do I? I'm not hungry, haven't been since I got back on the script. Not even a smidgen of thirst. I'm out sitting down in knee-deep snow and the blizzard's kicked back up and I'm not even cold. Strings surround me.

**I slip the money into my purse, but as I'm closing my wallet something slips out. I watch as a piece of paper blows around, then falls to the ground in front of me.** The snow parts for the picture like the Red Sea, all so it can rest on bare ground. All because I never said anything about snow. All for me. *I brought myself five hundred dollars.*

And a boyfriend, the picture reminds me. **I pick it up. The picture of Ned and me. Us at the Simpsons' barbecue. Oh we looked so...** that's a lie so big it gets stuck in my mouth. He doesn't look happy. It's a gross satire of a grin, even a grimace. The strings are pulling his lips open – I can see the lines of whitish-yellow where they press against his flesh. I, on the other hand, look beyond happy. It makes me nostalgic. It makes me sick.

I am Naomi Sanders. Mountains bow to me. The strings of fate will pull the world apart to put me where I used to think I belonged. But I don't

know what I'm doing. I don't know where I can go. All I know is, for some reason, I don't want to die yet. And – and I only realize this now – those two might come back for me. They might have backup next time. If I don't want to die, I probably have to follow the script.

*It won't solve itself if I sit here,* I tell myself after God knows how long.  
So I get up and move on with the story.

## ACT 2

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