My footsteps made wide splashes as I ran unevenly down the alley. The rainwater had collected here, but not enough to hinder me. Not nearly as much as the zip-tie did, anyway.
It would have been a hundred times worse if my hands had been tied behind my back, but as it was I had some difficulty scrambling up onto one of the dumpsters. From there, I was able to jump, barely, onto a nearby fire escape and begin climbing. Maybe if I made it up to the roof, I could jump to another building.
Flashing red and blue lights illuminated the alley from below, and a squad car slowly came to a stop at the entrance. No time to make it to the roof. I hurriedly opened the nearest window, thankfully unlocked, and dived in through it.
The police lights didn't focus on the window, so I assumed they hadn't seen me enter. Still I wasn't out of danger, not by a long shot. The apartment was dark. Either the occupants were gone, or asleep.
Quietly, I found my way into the kitchen, and began searching for a knife to cut myself free. Drawer after drawer revealed nothing sharper than a butter knife, though. Out of desperation, I'd just opened the pantry when the kitchen lights flicked on. I froze.
Slowly turning around, I found myself staring down into the eyes of a kid, couldn't be more than eight or nine years old. He was a little overweight, but didn't seem to be afraid of me. Still, if he screamed out...
"Hi." I said lamely.
"Hi."
I cautiously moved closer to him and peered into the living room. Faint snores could be heard from a hefty woman fully inclined in a lazy-boy chair. I counted at least six empty beer bottles surrounding the chair. Little chance of her waking up anytime soon. A little relieved, I turned my attention back to the boy.
"What's your name, kid?"
"What's yours?"
I gave him a flat look. "I asked first."
He paused for just a moment. "Ralph."
"Ok, Ralph, I'm Zeph." I resisted the urge to try and shake his hand. "You don't know where I could find a sharp knife, do you?"
He shook his head. "We don't have any sharp knives. Not anymore."
I gave him a puzzled look. "Why not?"
"Well, after mom hurt herself, Aunt Mabel took everything sharp away." He glanced past me into the living room. "I could ask her where she took them all, but she won't wake up for a long time."
I winced in sympathy. "Jeez. Is your mom ok?"
"She's fine." He shrugged. "They said something about 'across the street'. She just has to wear bandages when she gets back from the hospital." He paused. "I also kinda stabbed our neighbor's cat, too, so that might be it."
I could only stare at him. "Ok.. why'd you do that?"
"I dunno. I just wanted to see what it looked like on the inside. Doctors said I had.." He paused. "Soapy-something tendencies or something, at the hospital."
"... sociopathic tendencies?"
He nodded firmly. "That's it."
Feeling an increased sense of detachment from reality, I forced myself back to the matter at hand. "So it's just the three of us, here?"
"And Catamari." He pointed to a brown tabby cat asleep in the corner, and then gave me a long look. "Are you a criminal?"
"What? No."
"You look like a criminal."
"Yeah, well, you look like an advertisement about early-onset diabetes." I retorted.
He cocked his head. "What does that mean?"
"It means- ugh. Nevermind." I slipped past him and headed for the door. I'd almost reached it when I heard a radio beeping from out in the hall, accompanied by knocking noises. "NYPD, open up!"
"Shit!" I put my ear to the door. The voice had been faint; they were probably searching the nearby apartments, but I didn't have much time.
Belatedly, I remembered the kid and looked back at him. "Sorry."
He only shrugged. "I've heard worse." He gave me a sly look. "I can hide you from the cops. If you promise to give me half."
"Half. Half of what?"
"Whatever you stole."
I gave him an incredulous look. "You don't even know what I stole! THAT I stole anything!" I corrected myself hurriedly.
His only response was a smug smile.
The police voices were getting closer. "Gah! Fine. You can have half."
Right on cue, a knock sounded from the door. "NYPD, open up!"
Ralph sprang into motion. He grabbed a tape recorder from a nearby drawer and shoved it into my hands. "Press play when I call for mom, ok?"
Ignoring my confused look, he ran to the door and opened it. I barely had time to move out of sight before he did.
"Excuse me, young man, but have you seen this man anywhere around here tonight?" Their voices accompanied the rustle of paper.
"Nope."
There was a pause, followed by, "Can we talk to your parents?"
"Mom!" He called out loudly in my direction. "There are some men here to see you!"
Again, I felt that sense of unreality, as I pressed the Play button. A loud, annoyingly nasal voice emanated from it, accompanied by the splashing of water. "I just finished soaping up in here. Tell 'em I'll be out in half an hour."
I could hear some consternation from the cops, followed by a subdued "nevermind." They promptly left, and I heard the door close and lock.
I stepped out, a little stunned. He'd done it. I felt my appreciation for the pudgy little sociopath jump up a notch. "Thanks."
"Remember your promise, ok?" He grabbed my hand and led me into what was apparently his bedroom. He shifted some toys around, reached deep under his bed, and pulled out a paring knife.
"I thought you said all the sharp knives were gone!"
"I hid this one so I could carve my name into things." With a little sawing, he promptly cut my zip-tie, and it fell to the floor.
"Wow. You're all right, kid." I said, and he smiled broadly. "You know, my dad was also named Ralph."
"Was he a criminal too?"
"No." I scowled, then paused. "Well, yes, actually. He did some time for stealing cars." I sat down on the chair next to his bed, and he followed suit.
"That's cool. My dad's dead."
My mind reeled. A dead father, a suicidal mom, an alcoholic caregiver, and a sociopathic son. "Ralph... would you be ok if I were to drop by from time to time? Just to check in on you, of course." I almost choked on the words as they came out. The idea of 'me' of all people as a caregiver was laughable, but then...
I did owe him. And he did need help.
"Ok." He grabbed a book off the shelf next to his bed. "Will you read me a story?"
I looked out the window. It would be at least half an hour before it was safe for me to leave. "Why not?"