

Excerpt: Savor Me Slowly

Chapter One

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. The disturbing clatter whined inside Jaxon Tremain's mind, playing without permission or welcome. He laughed bitterly. He didn't know how long he'd been locked up in the dank little cell. A week? An eternity?

Perhaps an endless dirt nap loomed in his future. Yeah, undoubtedly. He should be glad. It would be another endless ticktocking, except there would be no pained awareness, no crazed waiting for death to – finally? blessedly? regrettably? -- come.

Survived worst, he thought, trying to comfort himself.

Once, he'd been shot and burned with a pyre-gun. An accident during training, but his shoulder still bore the fire-seared scars. Another time, he'd been undercover, ratted out, then weighed down with steel beams and tossed into a muddy man-made river. Water and grime had filled his mouth, stinging like acid down his throat, into his lungs. When he'd miraculously fought his way free, he'd been surprised to find his skin still intact, muscle still glued to bones.

Once, he'd been stabbed in the kidney. A straight cut, all the way through, severing one of his favorite organs. Foolishly, he'd turned his back on a suspect one second too long and adios, old friend.

Sometimes that's all that was needed. One second.

The words echoed in his mind. One second was a single tick. Or tock. He laughed again, but the laughter soon turned to gagging and the gagging to coughing, the coughing to choking pain.

"I'm going insane," he muttered when he calmed. Not that the words were understandable. "Tickity, tockity, tickity, tockity." How many more were left for him?

Couldn't be many.

Being an Alien Investigation and Removal agent for New Chicago certainly had its perks, he thought dryly. 'Cause when an agent needed help breaking his nasty breathing habit, he got help.

Since Jaxon's abduction, a group of aliens had whaled on him so many times he'd lost count. They'd probably whale on him a thousand times more, fists flying at him in tune with that fucking clock. *Tick, tock.* Another laugh. *Yep. Insane.*

The other-worlders had beaten him because he'd refused to answer their questions. Even when screams had erupted inside his mind, loud and discordant, mortality in every pitch, he hadn't caved. Remembering the screams, he shuddered. Perhaps all the men and women he'd killed over the years had risen up, their souls fused to his as they finally made themselves known, determined to be heard at last.

Now, at least, the screams were buried somewhere deep, replaced by that damn clock. Small price to pay, he supposed.

Unfortunately, his body's suffering had only intensified.

He'd been punched in the mouth until his teeth shredded his gums. His tongue was the size of a baseball, so big he couldn't even move it to ensure he was still the proud owner of all those pearly whites. His nose was broken, yet somehow the scent of urine still taunted him, blending with the metallic aroma of dried blood and sweat. His, a thousand others.

His eyes were swollen, leaving only tiny slits. Not that there was much to see. Murky darkness failed to live up to its promise of sweet oblivion, revealing four barred walls, a plastic-lined floor to better clean any gore, and old-fashioned metal chains that continually sliced into his wrists and ankles like razors.

Those chains rattled as he shifted to a more comfortable position against the bars. Big. Mistake. He winced as intense pain ripped through him; his air supply ground to a tormented halt. Several ribs were broken and any type of movement just cracked them further apart and made inflating his lungs an impossible chore, hundreds of needle-sharp pricks cresting.

Concentrate on something else, something enjoyable. Well, there was a bone protruding through his left arm and his right ankle was snapped back so far it was a miracle his foot hadn't fallen off. That was better, right?

Survived worse, he reminded himself. *Dated Cathy Savan-Holt.*

A stick banged against his cage.

Jaxon stiffened with the realization that he was no longer alone. His vision was blurred as he scanned the small enclosure, quickly landing on the intruder. Hate filled him. Hate – so helpless, a victim -- frustration and a twinge of fear.

The Delenseans had returned.

Not the party-loving race we always thought they were. Jaxon wondered if they'd come for interrogation or round eight of human piñata. Maybe both. He'd noticed the six-armed bastards sometimes liked to multitask. Either way, Jaxon had probably reached the end of the line.

Bye-bye breathing habit.

The other-worlders had to be tired of his lack of cooperation. They had to know his lips were sealed no matter what they did to him.

I led a good life. Kind of. As a trust-fund baby whose grandparents and parents had helped rebuild the city after the war and still had their fingers in several security businesses, he had more money than God, had traveled the world, and had friends who would die for him. Some already had. But he'd remained unattached to any semblance of home and hearth, distanced from nearly everything around him.

That distance seemed foolish now.

More banging. "Scared?" a heavily accented voice taunted. Metal creaked against metal as the door opened.

Darkened as the cell was and swollen as his lids were, Jaxon could only make out a shadowy outline. "You're kidding, right?" He barely managed to work the words past his enlarged tongue, wasn't even sure the bastard could understand him. "I've missed you, been counting the minutes till you returned and all that shit."

"You sound terrible. Like a drunk."

"Fuck you."

"Now *that* I understood." A pause, a laugh. "You know, you weren't this brash when I followed you all those weeks. Undetected," the alien added smugly. "You were always so reserved, so stoic. Not a single curse ever passed your lips."

Yes, Jaxon was known for his patience and manners. He'd taught himself to exude both. *Forced* himself to exude both, actually. Sometimes he could even pretend the serenity came naturally, that he didn't have to fight for it every second of every day.

"No explanation?"

About what? What had they been discussing? Oh, yeah. His lack of etiquette. "Amazing what having your toenails ripped off will do to a guy's personality." Actually, *this* was the real him. The sarcasm he usually repressed, and the potty mouth he usually flushed before a single bad word could escape. Safer that way. For everyone. Right now, however, he didn't give a shit what he acted like or what the consequences were. "Want me to show you? Prove it?"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk." Not a hint of anger laced the alien's tone. He was too cocky for that, too assured of his power. "So brazen you are. So foolish."

"Shoulda abducted Dallas, then. He's the smart one." Under normal circumstances, Jaxon would never have uttered another agent's name. But this group of Delenseans had been studying A.I.R. for weeks. *Undetected*, he inwardly mocked. They practically knew more than Jaxon. Everything from day to day operations at headquarters, to where the agents lived and what their hobbies were.

They'd taunted him with the information. Chuckled like every word had been a gut-busting joke. Even now, there was a soundtrack of their jeers in his ears: *Five o'clock sharp, Dallas arrives. He drinks a cup of coffee, talks to Kitty. Ghost shows up, usually eight minutes late. He has a new girlfriend and has trouble leaving her.*

They'd been able to take Jaxon from his own home quickly, expertly. Easily. As he remembered, embarrassment heated his cheeks. What kind of agent allowed himself to be taken from home? Answer: a bad one. Now there was a joke.

No way could he have been prepared, though. Shockingly, the blue-skinned aliens had mastered molecular transport. Something humans hadn't yet done, though they'd been working on it for a long time. Must be an innate ability of the race rather than technology. Still.

Mortifying how quickly he'd been taken by the unadvanced race. One minute Jaxon had been lounging on his couch, drinking beer and watching virtual playoffs and the next three Delenseans surrounded him, grinning like they'd just received swallow-it-all blow jobs. The next, he'd been here.

"Sleeping?" the alien asked, breaking the silence.

"Yeah. Maybe you should go. Let me rest."

"And maybe Dallas is already on my To Be Captured list." Again, the bastard sounded smug.

"I'm sure he'll love the accommodations. You're such a good host, Deli. Maybe I'll invite you to my home sometime. Show you *my* toys."

Rather than rile him, Jaxon seemed to amuse him all the more. "Call me Thomas. We're going to be on much more intimate terms, you and I."

Jaxon didn't have to rack his brain to interpret that little gem. Rape, the one thing they hadn't done yet. *Don't give him a reaction. You slept with Cathy, remember. Nothing worse. "Deli, man."* He was careful to enunciate every syllable, wanted the words understood. "Hate to hurt your feelings, but you're not my type."

The alien shrugged. "I will be soon enough, I'm sure."

He drew in a slow breath, held . . . held -- *god, the pain* -- then released it just as slowly. In, out. In – he stilled, frowned. Thoughts of rape receded, drowned by an intoxicating awareness. What was that delicious fragrance? He inhaled again; his nostrils twitched. And then he knew.

The Delensean wasn't alone.

The other-worlder emitted a whiskey-like scent, yet Jaxon smelled something sweet and heady. Something floral. His blood heated and his skin pulled tight. His stomach clenched. His shaft even twitched in its first show of interest since his imprisonment. Actually, long before.

Jaxon blinked in surprise. Weak as he was, the reaction should have been impossible, yet his body was acting like the fragrance was laced with undiluted pheromones. That must mean --

Woman.

Human? Alien? *Does it matter?* Enemy, definitely.

He'd always enjoyed the scents women slathered over their bodies, but this one seemed so much more *everything* than anything else he'd ever encountered. The perfume was utterly feminine and wholly alluring, like a drug. Illegal. Enthralling. He could have basked in it for hours.

"Brought you a present this time," Thomas said. He chuckled, as if remembering another of his lameass jokes. "I hope you like her."

A second shadowy figure stepped around the other-worlder, not moving closer to Jaxon but staying at a distance so that she could most likely study him. A long moment thundered by in silence. He could tell that she was tall for a female. Probably five nine or five ten. Blonde, if the bright halo glowing around her head was any indication.

"His eyes are practically sealed shut," she said, her voice husky and rich. Sexy.

Jaxon's blood heated another degree, shocking and angering him. What kind of moron lusted after his executioner? And there was no doubt in his mind that's what she was. Why else would she be here? *Tick, tock.* A muscle under his eye spasmed. That annoying counting had begun yet again. Damn it. What would it take to get rid of it? Death?

"Is that a problem?" Thomas asked the woman.

"You know I like to see their eyes when I work."

This time, there was a princess-whine in her tone that might have been amusing in any other situation. She made him think of a little girl who'd asked Santa for a pony but had found a kitten under the tree instead. The kitten wasn't what she'd wanted, so the kitten wouldn't be tolerated.

"My apologies, Marie," Thomas said, and damn if he didn't sound like he meant it. "The agent provoked our wrath."

Sincere remorse from Thomas? Marie must frighten him. Interesting.

Marie sighed angrily and stretched a hand toward Thomas. "We'll discuss this later. Was he given a truth serum?"

"Of course. He told us his name was Minnie Mouse and he lived on Nightmare Lane."

"Training people to fight such drugs should be illegal," she muttered. "My tools, please."

Don't speak; don't you dare speak. "You don't need any tools, honey." The words left on a determined burst, unstoppable, meaning to prove his fearlessness. But leaving it at that would have proven the opposite, so even though he wanted to remain silent, he purposefully added, "Come sit on my lap and I'll tell you everything you want to know."

He expected her to gasp, to stomp over and slap him. Maybe part of him hoped to goad her into beginning whatever she had planned. Nothing was worse than waiting, not even the electric shock nipple clamps they'd used earlier, and those had provided a bitch of a hurt.

Marie merely gave another of those pouting sighs and said to Thomas, "Yes, I see what you mean. His attitude is quite maddening. Though that doesn't excuse your behavior," she added. "You invited *me* here. As your guest, I expect my desires to be heeded."

"Of course. His face will not be touched again."

"Good. What has he told you so far?"

"Besides the lies, nothing. No matter what we've done to him," Thomas said, obviously perplexed, "he's told us nothing about the virus."

"That's because he knows nothing," Jaxon muttered. Another lie, of course. He knew a lot more than even his boss assumed. And as Marie and Thomas muttered between themselves, some of the memories began flickering through Jaxon's mind.

"You and you alone will work this one," Jack Pagosa had said, handing him a sealed golden folder. Jack's usually ruddy face had been pale, his eyes constantly darting to the office door as if he expected someone to burst inside at any moment, gun in hand. His thick salt and pepper hair stood on end, his hands plowing through it every few seconds.

"Why me?" Jaxon had asked as he'd plopped into the seat in front of his boss's desk, immediately wanting to snatch back the words. He knew why, and no one liked to hear they were being given a job simply because they were the last option, the only person available.

Mia Snow, Jack's right-hand agent, was busy training New Chicago's newest recruits, young girls fresh from boot camp. And Mia's partner, Dallas, had been unstable ever since his recovery from a near-death experience.

Jack popped a handful of antacids, chewed, swallowed audibly. "Not why you're thinking, obviously. One, you're the calmest man I know. And two, you can get answers out of a dead man." More antacids. "Oh, yeah. And the fewer people who know those answers, the less chance of panic. This is all very hush, hush."

Later that night, when Jaxon opened the folder and began reading, he hadn't felt calm. *He'd* felt panicked.

Seemed a new alien race had snuck their way onto the planet.

Government was calling them Schön. *Beautiful* in German. There'd been a few sightings here and there, and their numbers seemed to be small. No more than eleven, so no big deal. After all, a new alien race seemed to arrive every fucking day. Not that he was bitter or anything. What brought the Schön under A.I.R. scrutiny, however, was the fact that they excreted some kind of toxic liquid.

The liquid not only killed, it did something far worse.

These other-worlder men were, apparently, so lovely to gaze upon human women were throwing themselves at them. And every woman who did so ended up in the hospital with grade nine hallucinations, losing touch with reality more and more everyday until finally developing a hunger for human flesh they couldn't suppress.

Jaxon had interviewed them in both the beginning and ending stages of the sickness. His stomach rolled with the memory. He hadn't told anyone what he'd learned and wasn't going to until he'd processed the information himself. Panic? Jack had no idea.

After the interviews, well, the women had needed to be put down like animals and Jaxon had been the one to do it. He'd hated himself for it, *still* hated himself, but there'd been no other recourse. Those females would have eaten their own young – literally -- if they'd been allowed to live.

He should be on the streets right now, hunting the Schön. Until they were destroyed, more and more victims would surface. Didn't take a psychic to figure that out, just a person with half a brain. Jaxon qualified. Right now, he felt like only half of his remained. If he didn't get out there soon. . .

You know Jack. He's got someone on the streets already, doing what you were supposed to be doing. Jaxon tried to take comfort in that.

"What thoughts tumble through your mind, hmm?"

Jaxon blinked, the woman inside his cell coming into gradual focus. He must have drifted, because he hadn't heard her move, yet she was now crouched in front of him. Her long legs straddled his and she was gently cupping his cheeks in her soft hands. One of her palms was warm,

the other cool and silky, as if it were covered by some kind of material and ice was packed underneath.

Though his vision was murky and distilled, he was quite certain he'd never been closer to perfection. Her eyes were mesmerizing onyx and framed by midnight. Her skin was pale and smooth, lickable cream. Her nose, perfectly sloped. Her cheekbones, a work of art. Her lips, a fantasy come to life. Plump, red, luscious, the kind of lips a man usually had to pay for to enjoy.

Her scent was stronger now, all the better, and he thought he caught a hint of jasmine. Wild, exotic. Like the woman herself?

Like it mattered. Much as he wanted to, he didn't delude himself. She *was* a professional torturer and killer, had probably studied the human body so that she knew every sensitive place and the best ways to enforce maximum pain.

"You won't even give me a tiny little hint?" she beseeched, her long lashes fluttering, beckoning him deeper into the black sea of her gaze. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Hint?" He played stupid. Sadly, it was not a difficult task. "Hint about what?" What was she wearing?

Finally, a silver lining to his ravaged face. He couldn't see clearly enough to discern her clothing, which meant, in his mind, she was wearing lingerie. Black, like her eyes. With sheer lace. She had small breasts, but they were soft and pink-tipped.

Despite his condition, his dick lengthened, thickened, hardened.

Marie gave a sweet little gasp, as if she felt that hardness, but didn't move away. "I didn't expect such a response from you. You're surprising me at every turn, Jaxon Tremain."

She spoke as if she were weaving a spell, soft and melodic, her voice lulling him, drawing him in and holding him under. What would she sound like during orgasm?

Damn, where were these thoughts coming from?

He heard Thomas groan impatiently, but he didn't care. "You should unchain me," he told Marie, using his most seductive voice. "We should go on a date."

A pause, a frown. Her head tilted to the side as she studied him more intently. Frown deepening, she reached for his left wrist, caught herself, and stilled. She gulped and licked her lips. "And what would we do on this date?"

Jaxon imagined he heard a wistful note in her tone. "We'd have lots and lots of fun."

"Oh, really." Her frown softened at the edges, adding all kinds of sexy to her expression. "My type of fun or yours?"

He knew what she was asking: pain or pleasure. "Mine, but I'm sure we could incorporate some of yours if you asked me nicely."

"Marie, this is – " Thomas interrupted.

Her entire body stiffened, and her chin whipped to the side as she pierced the alien with a fierce glare. "Shut it, Thomas. You've already pissed me off once. Want to make it twice?"

Silence.

Jaxon latched onto the chance to examine her more closely. In profile, her chin had a stubborn jut to it and her ear was studded with multiple diamonds. She had shoulder-length hair, straight as a ruler, and he wished he had the strength to reach up and sift the pale velvet strands through his fingers. Wished he had the good fortune to have the strands spread over his thighs while she sucked him dry. *Like you can handle that right now, idiot.*

"I'm losing you again." Facing him once more, Marie stroked her fingers over his cheeks, careful, so careful of his bruises. "Blood loss affecting your concentration, sweet?"

"Sorry. What?"

She uttered a warm chuckle. "An apology, after everything that's been done to you. How surprising." Another chuckle. "You were about to give me a hint. About the Schön, their virus, and the women they've infected."

When he pressed his lips together, her warmth vanished.

Tick. Christ! Not the clock. *Shut up, shut up, shut up.*

"You look like you're in a lot of pain, Jaxon." Her voice was all business now. "Tell me what I desire, and the pain ends. The agony stops. You have my word."

As they had every other time he'd been asked, fifteen years of fieldwork and a year of training kicked into gear. *Always deny. A single detail can blow an entire case.* "I don't know what you're talking about." *Tock.*

There was a heavy pause. "Would you know if I cut off one of your testicles and you had to watch Thomas eat it?" Violent as the question was, she asked it with the sweetness of an angel. One of her brows arched as she waited for his answer.

"Ouch." How many times had she performed that little operation? "Nope. I'm afraid that wouldn't jog my memory. How could it? I don't know anything." *Tick.*

"Is it bad that I was hoping you'd say that?" She didn't wait for his response. "Thomas, be a dear and hand me Damocles."

"Mmm, excellent choice," the alien said happily. A few seconds later, metal whistled against syn-leather, and then Thomas was grinning and clomping to Marie's side.

Now Jaxon arched a brow. Or rather, hoped he did. Most of his facial muscles were currently unworkable. He hoped he looked interested rather than terrified. "Damocles? You name your weapons?"

"You mean you don't?" she asked in surprise. She gripped the hilt of a sword, and he could see sharp, curved steel glistening from the only bulb hanging from the ceiling.

At least it was clean, no rusty, metallic aroma wafting from it.

"No," he said. "Never have."

"A shame, since they can be a person's best friend."

"Or worst enemy."

She tapped the end of his nose with her free hand, the one uncovered. Warm. "Had you been armed at your home, you might not have been taken. Best friend."

At the patient censure in her tone, he barked out a laugh. "Lesson learned, believe me."

"Sadly, it's too late."

Ticktock, ticktock. For some reason, all of his emotions drained from him. He should have been more afraid than ever. Should have been trembling, pissing his pants. *Something.* Instead, the only emotion that returned and stayed was a curious sense of relief.

Finally, the beatings would stop. The rape wouldn't happen. And maybe the afterlife would pair him with an angel who looked just like Marie. Minus the penchant for killing, of course.

When did you become such a pussy? Fight this! Fight her.

"Last chance to tell me what I want to know," she said, pressing the cold steel to his neck.

One second passed. Another. When he continued to remain silent, she nicked the skin until a bead of blood trickled. Thankfully the ticking did not resume. Odd, though, since these were most likely his last moments on Earth.

She pressed harder.

He gave no reaction to the sting. Hell, a little prick was nothing compared to what he'd already endured. Slowly she lowered her hand, gliding the blade over his bare chest, cutting skin along the way. She reached his navel, twirled paper-thin slices all around, then stopped right between his denim-clad legs.

Thomas, who'd remained at her side, chortled with glee. Probably had a hard-on.

God, I hate making him happy. Jaxon swallowed a sudden rise of anger. *Not so relieved anymore.* His fight reflex sparked to life, blending with the anger and warring with his need for closure. Sweat poured down his chest.

"Well," Marie prompted. The tip nicked his pants and pressed between his balls. "Anything to say?"

Closure won. Without him, these people would never be able to find the Schön. And if they couldn't find the Schön, they couldn't use them as a weapon against humans, or whatever else they were planning.

Jaxon closed his eyes and said goodbye to one of his favorite body parts. *I love you little guys. We had some good times together.*

"Last chance, Jaxon."

His gaze met Marie's, locking, clashing. Unflinching. "I told you. I don't know what you're talking about."

Her lush lips rose in an exquisite smile, lighting her entire face. Just then, she was the perfect blend of good and evil, innocence and absolute wickedness. His traitorous heart skipped a beat in total, masculine appreciation. Her teeth were straight and white, the pink tip of her tongue peeking out the center as if she were nibbling on it. "That answer just saved your life," she said, and then her arm lashed to the side and she stabbed Thomas in the stomach.

Blood sprayed Jaxon's face as Marie moved her blade in and out. The alien jerked and gasped in pained shock. Jaxon could only watch, morbidly awed, utterly confused. That death blow had been meant for him. Hadn't it?

Smile becoming dark, lethal, Marie rose on her knees, twisting her wrist to drive the blade even deeper while hacking at every organ she could reach. "Enjoy hell, you sick fuck. You have no idea how long I've wanted to do this."

Thomas collapsed in a motionless heap, convulsing to his death, and all Jaxon could do was stare over at him, wondering what the hell was going on.