

## Prime Suspects

by Jim Bernheimer

### Chapter 1

#### Rude Awakening

“He’s coming around,” a muffled voice said.

Everything was wrong ... off. I was cold and slimy. My eyelids were gummed shut and wouldn’t open more than a crack. Blanketed in darkness, with only a sliver of light to go by, I tried to figure out what was going on. My heartbeat pounded inside my skull, irregular and all over the place, in a race with what I didn’t know.

“Bring his body temp up, quickly.” There was a rush of warm air and the slab I was sprawled out on turned into a hotplate.

With the tubes in my mouth, I tried to ask what was going on, but the words came out garbled, worse than that time when my jaw was broken and it was wired shut.

“Hang in ... Bagini .... ... do our job.”

I only caught half of what the voice said. The one word I latched onto was Bagini. It was my last name and my friends called my Dave. The fog started to lift and I went over the mental checklist. My job was a homicide detective and this wasn’t the first time I’d woken up in a bad state. That broken jaw I’d mentioned earlier came with blunt force trauma to the head and a two day nap the doctors called a “light coma.”

There were a few dark alleys running adjacent to my stroll down memory lane. Darwin, the capital city of Galax IV, could be a violent place. Like the ancient Earther it was named for, it was a testament to the saying, “survival of the fittest.”

At that moment, it didn't feel like it, but I was alive and that was what mattered. My thoughts swirled and I clutched at strands trying to determine what happened. I wiggled my fingers and toes. They were all there, so that was good news. In fact, other than all that shit shoved in my mouth, I couldn't feel any pain.

*Industrial strength drugs?* Maybe. I couldn't be sure.

*Had I been dosed with Freak and suffered a bad reaction?* That wouldn't look good on my evals. I'd heard of the gangs doing that to cops, but that mostly happened to officers in narcotics. Homicide cops who got too close, didn't end up discredited. They ended up dead.

Hands using towels scrubbed away the gunk on my face. The force pressed the back of my head down on the table. The med techs' bedside manners left much to be desired. I caught them saying something about my ears before a vice immobilized my entire head. I heard a low rumbling, a sucking sound, and a sudden painful pop as the pressure equalized.

Hearing returned and all the distorted noises I couldn't place came into focus.

"Can you hear me? Grunt once if you can." The woman's words were bored.

Lacking anything better to do, I grunted once.

"Good. We're going to finish clearing your eyes and then remove the breathing tubes.

Grunt twice if you understand."

I resented being treated this way, but did as she said. Being a cop, I was used to being the one with the condescending tone. When I could see her, I'd memorize that face and she'd be in trouble if she ever crossed my path.

They continued to work, oblivious to my discomfort. To them it was just another day at the office. "I was almost out of here when this one came in. If I'd only been a few minutes quicker. Oh well, Ryan got our reservations changed, so no harm done. What are you doing this weekend, Ted?"

The man answered, “I thought I’d get away and take the shuttle out to our place in the islands and do some deep sea fishing. How about you, Anne?”

“Oh, there’s an art exhibit and an opera on my schedule.”

I’d have rolled my eyes, if they weren’t being prodded at the moment. The normal “meat cutters” I typically ran into at the emergency room didn’t have places in the islands. Hell, the nearest islands to Darwin were over two thousand kilometers away! These were the kind that turned their noses up at the local doc in a box. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

“That sounds relaxing,” the man replied. “Remind me to have a word with the maintenance clones. They need to do further diagnostics on the incubation chamber. This one came out at too low of a temperature. Maybe it was just the sample, but I would rather be certain.”

*What?* His words caught me off guard. *Incubation chamber! They only use those in ... no ... shit ... no! I can’t be a clone!*

I’d been in fistfights, hostage situations, and fired my weapon at more criminals than I’d ever care to admit, but I flat out panicked. I kicked, struggled and lashed out. Ted would probably need to cancel his trip, since I might have broken a couple of his fingers. Anne had faster reflexes and got out of the way. She barked a security command and a pulse of electricity left me in a fit of involuntary spasms.

“What in the hell just happened?” Ted practically growled, cradling his hand and activating whole body restraints which immobilized my convulsing body.

“Are you okay?” The woman asked over my garbled moans.

“Damn that hurts! Miserable test tube reject! I say fry him and start over.”

Those words beat back the hysteria of discovering I was a clone. If things got any worse, it might be the only discovery I ever made.

“Ted, remember protocol,” she whispered motioning her head slightly. My almost cleaned eyes made out the shape of a vidcam mounted on the wall.

The male doctor grimaced as I realized my fate would be decided on how much these two played by the rules. Taking an injector, he applied it to the back of his hand.

“That’s better,” he said. “Alright, let’s figure out what caused Bagini Forty-Two’s fit before we spend another two hours on Bagini Forty-Three.”

For the second time my world spun. The word “Forty-Two” was like a second jolt of high voltage. This one left my mind reeling and in worse shape than my body. Mercifully, I passed out.

## Chapter 2

### Me, Myself, and I

*“Welcome to Prescott Freehold on New Tiberius, Detective David Louis Bagini, Forty-Two. Your Prime was contracted to be the homicide investigator for this colony with a population of twelve hundred eighteen Primes and fifty-nine thousand four hundred and twenty six clones.”*

I'd come to in a chair and reached the conclusion that the two doctors decided not to dispose of their dysfunctional lab rat, but there were still restraints preventing me from moving. There was an old man in the room who paused the vid on the wallscreen.

“I am Doctor Smythe, the facility director. You are a clone. Do you understand this?”

“I understand what you're saying, but I don't believe you,” I replied.

“Why is that?”

“I think I'd know if I was.”

The doctor tapped some keys on his datascroll. It was a high end model, but if they were trying to convince me of this farce, I expected nothing less.

“What year do you think it is?”

I told him.

“I'm afraid you're about twenty years behind, Officer.”

I gulped involuntarily. He opened a wallscreen to the outside. “This is a dual star system. You are not in the Galax system. You are in a cloning facility. What does that tell you?”

My silence was the only answer I was willing to give.

“I see,” he said. “I have brought up the records of the sample you were created from and I think I can explain. Do you recall the reason your Prime underwent an extraction procedure?”

“Yes,” I answered, not enjoying his choice of wording. “It was for the Sterling murder trial. Several witnesses and one of my coworkers had been killed. The department and the DA weren’t going to take any chances.”

My attention was drawn to my hairless arms. Rubbing a thumb against my index finger, I mused that my skin was like that of a newborn babe. It also meant I was bald. Strangely enough, that bothered me more than just about anything else. The one that trumped it was the barcode burned into the back of my left wrist. If this was a hoax, they certainly went all out.

In reality, I was fighting back my shock and hoping this was all one bad dream. Part of me also realized that maintaining my composure at that moment might be the only thing that was keeping me alive.

“Now, do you remember anything after that?”

I tried. I searched the corners of my mind and finally I shook my head. “No, I don’t.”

My reply seemed to be acceptable to the man in the white lab coat. The man paced a few steps before saying, “Ah, evidence preservation. Yes. Yes. It all makes perfect sense now.”

“Glad it makes sense to you,” I said.

“Your confusion is understandable. Your situation is rather unusual. Your Prime’s clone counseling regimen didn’t start until three galactic standard years after this sample. That doesn’t happen very often in my line of work and under normal circumstances it would be something to do a research paper on.”

That sounded really exciting ... for him. For me, there was an empty, numb feeling in my soul, assuming I even had one. The fear was building that he wasn’t “out to get me” and that this was just him doing his job. Maybe, I wasn’t Dave Bagini, hotshot detective, working the mean streets of Darwin in the Galax system. Hell if that vid was to be believed, I wasn’t even on the same planet! Turns out the real Dave sold out and did something he swore he’d never do – sign a

clone contract. Clone cities were usually founded on backwater, marginally habitable worlds where few “real people” known as Primes lived. My day just kept getting better.

“Are we at a point where I can deactivate the restraints without you experiencing another violent outburst?”

I nodded, while wondering what weapon he had concealed in the pocket of his coat in case I did try something. The inflexible restraints snapped back into the armrest and I used my right hand to rub the reddish bruise on my left forearm.

We stared at each other for an uncomfortable minute until he began speaking once more, “Very good. Now Doctor Walsh will come in and perform a physical examination on you while I continue to observe. After that we can let you finish watching the indoctrination video.”

The female doctor from before entered. She wasn’t particularly cheerful either. I guessed her dinner plans had been canceled and I was to blame.

“Let’s get this over with,” she said holding up a single finger. “Do not move your head and follow my finger with your eyes.”

While I did this, Doctor Smythe slipped out of the room and joined the group of silhouettes in the viewing room above. Though the intercom system was off, there was an argument going on up there. Thus far, I’d managed to injure someone, piss off someone else, and generate a commotion. It probably wasn’t a good start, but I ... well Dave always made lousy first impressions and I was following quickly in his footsteps.

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“Is he ready?” The intercom clicked on after what had to be thirty minutes passed and an impatient voice asked. My eyesight had returned to normal, but standing for longer than five minutes was a problem. I seriously doubted I was ready for anything other than a three day nap.

“Officer, there has been a slight problem. I’m afraid we will need an extended acclimation period. The new clone will be released when I am done with him,” Doctor Walsh answered.

“Honestly, I could give a shit, Doc. Our crime scene is getting colder by the second. We’ll get him caught up on everything he needs to know on the way.”

“He’s barely able to walk at the moment. This is all highly irregular,” the woman said trying to sound convincing.

“Yeah, I’m sure he feels like death warmed over, but we’ve got orders from the top to get the rookie on the job, right now.” The voice and the attitude were all too familiar. The door opened and two older versions of me entered the room. Any hopes that I still had of this being a big hoax ended. The older had a crew cut and the younger a thick ponytail. Over the doctor’s objections, they disconnected all the monitoring devices and unceremoniously hauled me out of the chair.

“You’re late for your first day on the job rookie,” the older looking me said. “Time to go solve a murder.”

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There was the distinct impression that the “real” people staffing this cloning facility weren’t too pleased at being bossed around by a couple of clone cops even if they had authorization from who knows where. The director was adamant that I should be scheduled for an intensive regimen of counseling. That sounded delightful. While one of my counterparts told me how “lucky” I was the other clone half-heartedly reassured the director that the police commissioner would make it a top priority.

Director Smythe clearly wasn’t accustomed to being summarily dismissed. “Believe me when I tell you this, clone, I will make a detailed complaint to the clone council and you have not heard the last of this.”



“We’re just following orders, Doctor,” the crew cut officer answered in a much more formal tone than he used with the female. “Do whatever you feel is necessary, Doctor, but these orders came directly from the mayor and the clone council. C’mon, let’s get him changed and into the squadhopper.”

My surly colleagues introduced themselves as Daves Sixteen and Twenty-Nine. After fifteen awkward minutes of them helping me dress, they led me out of the climate controlled building and into the suffocating humidity outside. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the worst thing awaiting me.

The smell of rotten eggs forced me to gag. The two clones next to me nearly burst with laughter.

“Happens every time! Don’t you just love sulfur processing?” The younger one with the ponytail asked patting me on the back. “Younger” was actually misleading, since the clone looked like he was almost a decade older than me. Sixteen was probably five or maybe ten years older than him. The whole thing reminded me of the time back at the precinct in Darwin, where I ... damn it all ... the original Dave Bagini used an age progression simulation to see what he’d look like as he got older.

“I don’t know about you Forty-Two, but I just love the smell of the *Peebold* in the morning,” Sixteen said stuffing me into the back of a squadhopper. His partner shoved a steaming container of hot black liquid along with a greasy egg and meat sandwich thing in my hands and slammed the door shut.

“This stuff tastes awful!” I said after my first unsteady sip. The hopper lifted off into the sky with a violent jerk into what I guessed was late evening, but there was a second star coming up on the horizon. How anyone could tell time here was a mystery.

“You’ll get used to it, Baldy” Sixteen answered mocking my appearance.

“To what? The smell? This shit?”

Sixteen used one hand and opened the pass through window in the barrier separating us. He passed a small plastic mask through and said, “Take your pick, you can breathe or you can eat and drink. Can’t do both at the same time, so eventually you’ll have to get accustomed to the air.”

Setting the mask on the seat beside me, I took another sip and grimaced. “Maybe I should take this opportunity to quit coffee?”

“Don’t bother, rook. It’s the closest thing to coffee in this solar system that you can afford on your salary. The sandwich is decent enough.”

He was right, of course. That led me to wonder if being mad at them constituted self-loathing.

I spotted something on Sixteen and decided to return some of the harassment. “Is that an earring?”

“Didn’t take him long to notice that! You owe me some money there, Sweet.”

“Bite me! I’m asserting my individuality, and before you say anything about what ear is pierced, it’s the right ear for this planet.”

Sixteen’s angry answer made Twenty-Nine laugh even harder.

“Sweet?” I asked wondering where this would lead.

“Yeah,” Twenty-Nine answered. “He’s Sweet Sixteen. Should we tell him about Eleven’s lifestyle choice and really mess with him.”

“What’s this all about?” I asked.

Sixteen ignored the two of us as Twenty-Nine chuckled and then said, “Eleven shaved his head and is doing the Neo-Monastic thing and beating the old peace and tolerance drum now. You look like his kid brother.”

“You’re pulling my leg, right?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Guess you’ll just have to wait and see,” Twenty-Nine answered, looking very full of himself. I always thought my sense of humor was one of my more charming characteristics. In this light, I realized that I’m actually something of an asshole. Then again, maybe it was just Twenty-Nine who was.

The squadhopper was a newer and sleeker type of VTOL than I was familiar with, but I reasoned the controls were similar. At some point I’d have to get qualified on it. The vehicle looked like something mechanical mated with a giant insect. The big bulbous eyes were where the pilots sat. I should have asked to sit in the front. The second row seating was for low threat criminals with a thick perforated screen separating the officers in front. In Darwin, it had been known as “riding in the Rax” in a reference to the thorax. Behind me was the bulkhead and the “paddywagon” portion of the hopper that could hold around a dozen suspects. The ventilation system must have some heavy duty filters on it because the air only held a hint of that rotten egg smell.

From the reinforced windows of the squadhopper, I took in the scenery. The Freehold was a tightly packed sprawl of buildings surrounded by what looked like a vast swamp. I caught myself muttering, “Lovely.” The outlying structures were up on stilted platforms where it appeared that the city began overflowing into wetlands. Sixteen was kind enough to point out the suicide prevention nets lining every building over three stories. When I asked him why, Twenty-Nine replied and said that the Primes were very interested in protecting their funding sources – which really meant us.

The temperature outside was hot and the humidity was oppressive. All this made me really wanted to know why the “real” Dave decided on this hellhole, but I had a theory and it involved a sizeable chunk of money and him living large on his clone contract while we did all the work.

Considering it was something I, or more appropriately he, had never entertained the idea of doing, I was more than a little curious to learn the reason. That would have to wait. Someone was

murdered and it must be important if a mayor and whatever the clone council might be were involved.

Gathering what little dignity I could scrounge, I asked, "So who's dead and why do I care?"

Sixteen looked over his right shoulder and rolled his eyes, before saying, "Lose the attitude, fresh meat. Doesn't work with us. The Commish is at the scene and is waiting to brief you. We got the call to come pick you up on our way back from transporting a couple of prime criminals to the penitentiary in Greenville on petty drug and cloneslaughter charges. It's all rush-rush and hush-hush."

"Let me guess; only primes go to prison?" Seeing all the petroleum platforms, I guessed the Freehold was an oil and natural gas colony.

"That's pretty much the case," Twenty-Nine replied. "They got wasted and drove a loader over a couple of clones. The most they can pin on a Prime for killing one of us is cloneslaughter, it's roughly the same penalty they'd get for assault and battery on a crotchdropper."

I reasoned the slang was a term for a natural born human as the asshole continued his half-rant, "Doesn't really matter though. The prison is more like a rehab clinic than anything you'd remember. When clones get convicted, it's usually a death sentence. They can always make another one. But you know the funny part? The Prime has to pay an accountability fine!"

Sixteen banked to the left and headed east. The hopper throttled up and what passed for civilization quickly disappeared. Minutes passed and I followed twin maglev tracks for maybe twenty-five kilometers before seeing the signs of a small community in the distance.

"We're headed for where the Primes live? Nothing like Galax Four, huh?" I stated.

"Know anything about clone communities, Forty-Two?"

“A little,” I said and finished off the last bite of the sandwich, “Primes live in resort communities and the clones do all the work. They get a signing bonus, guaranteed salary, and a cut of each clone’s paycheck.”

“And we get the shaft!” Twenty-Nine added.

Since the crime obviously involved a Prime, it added a layer of complexity to whatever I was about to be dragged, kicking and screaming, into. Still, I probably should have been grateful, otherwise I’d only be a few cell scrapings in a deep freezer somewhere.

“Take a gander at the good life, Forty-Two,” Sixteen scoffed, “because it ain’t for the likes of us.”

Below were parks, a pair of golf courses, swimming pools, and all the trappings of privilege, like some kind of cruel and twisted reflection of the life I had always dreamed about. I reckoned it was worse than a sucker punch to the gut.

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With a hiss of pneumatic landing gear deploying, we came to rest in front of a picturesque housing dome, next to another police vehicle. Climbing out and clutching at the exterior handles for support, I was surprised there weren’t any onlookers gawking. At least the sulfur smell was gone and I could breathe again. Chucking the face mask back inside the hopper, I looked at the one person who was nearby. Another Dave waited at the entrance, a sign proclaiming *Crime Scene. No Unauthorized Entry* hovered next to him. He was closer to my age and bored out of his skull.

“Who’s that?” I asked Twenty-Nine.

“That there is Forty-One, who up until now was the runt of the litter. He’ll be happy that he’s no longer low man on the pole anymore.”

“Let me guess, low man gets the shit jobs?”

“You catch on pretty quick, Four by Two. And yes, it sucks to be you. Actually, it sucks to be any of us, but it *really* sucks to be you.”

“Beautiful.”

“Hey guys,” Forty-One said eyeballing me. “Fresh meat, I see.” I was drawn to the new clone’s eyes. He’d done something to them. They were reflective mirrors with no pupils. It was disconcerting.

Sixteen laughed and said, “Still has that new clone smell. Don’t worry, you’ll always be a rookie to me, kid. Shouldn’t you be taking some statements from the neighbors or something?”

Forty-One looked incredulous and said, “Give me an ounce of credit! I took care of that two hours ago. The Commish is waiting for you three inside. He’s not exactly happy with all the delays either. Get up with me soon Forty-Two, unlike these two throwbacks; I’ll hook you up with everything you need to know.”

I nodded to him as Twenty-Nine made a clever comment about how I’d need to know how to properly archive hopper logs and fill out daily reports. Even though it felt like I’d walked into a thousand different crime scenes, this one was my very first. The real Dave Bagini often wondered about his purpose in life. I didn’t have that problem. The reason for my existence was up that sidewalk and inside someone’s residence.