

## Chapter 1

### Henry Baldwin

At a very young age, Henry Baldwin demonstrated precocious intelligence. It began when he reasoned that there were only two kinds of people in the world: those who gave orders and those who took them. Instinctively, he knew that he was destined to be a member of the former group. In a short time, he realized that those giving the orders had one thing in common: they all occupied positions of authority or seats of power. He began to study these people to learn the common grounds for their success. When he found the answer, he was amazed at how simple and obvious it was. It was material wealth. To those who had it, authority and power flowed naturally. When, on occasion, someone who lacked such resources accidentally stumbled into a position of authority or power, the wealth followed as night follows day. He concluded that financial success could be both a cause and an effect. Thereafter, young Henry pursued wealth with an enthusiasm that mirrored religious zeal. Since he was chasing his destiny, no action was too unconventional, no maneuver was too underhanded. There were no civil laws, no moral tenets, no standards of decency that restricted him. The only two sins he acknowledged were failure and stupidity. He resolved never knowingly to be guilty of either one. A SecondActs 2 In college, he majored in Finance, with very nearly a second major in Psychology. His mind was a sponge, absorbing everything. At his leisure, he sorted the knowledge, assimilating what advanced his purpose, and discarding the rest as no better than yesterday's garbage. He earned a Ph.D. in Finance from Princeton University and a Law Degree from Charleston University. While the latter degree may appear incongruous, he reasoned that, if one was going brazenly to disregard the rules, one should at least understand

what they were. His first position after leaving school was with Alchemy Assets Management. His rise in the firm was nothing short of meteoric. It was the level of success certain to attract the attention of his superiors at the firm as well as the Securities Exchange Commission. Upper management at Alchemy Assets was concerned because they feared, quite rightly, that Henry Baldwin was aiming to replace them and take control of the firm. The SEC was concerned because they knew that no one made that much money that fast by honest means. Management sensed the hot breath of the SEC and made Baldwin a buy-out offer that no sane person would refuse. Henry was many things but insane was not one of them. In the securities industry, the word was out. Henry Baldwin was bad news. Nobody would talk to him, much less offer him a job. He needed a safe, secure harbor where he could rebuild his career. One of his last remaining friends called his attention to an advertisement in The Chronicles of Really High Education. Thornton University in Harrison was searching for a Vice President for Business. It was a position of authority and responsibility and, for him, an inviting sanctuary. He did not Henry Baldwin 3 have any strong urge to teach but, after all, how hard could it be? He applied, interviewed, and was hired beginning 1 January 2018. Alchemy Assets Management had provided him with sterling recommendations as an inducement for his uncontested departure. Thornton was mesmerized by his credentials. They congratulated themselves on their good fortune. As for Baldwin, he pushed his salary demands to the high end of the Thornton range. He was granted faculty status as a visiting Assistant Professor of Finance. His teaching duties were one course, of his own choosing, usually scheduled during a summer term. The salary was a considerable come-down from what he had been earning in Industry. However, he treated it as merely his base pay, and he recognized many ways in which he could supplement it. Besides, he had no intention of staying at Thornton long

term. It was simply a convenient and comfortable place to wait until he was no longer regarded as a pariah in the financial community. Once he had settled into the Thornton routine, he began a systematic, in-depth, study of the University's finances. He inventoried all the assets and the liabilities. He tracked the cash flow. He soon knew better than anyone else on campus the financial health of the institution. He discovered several areas that, in the right hands, were ripe for exploitation. His approach was patient and methodical. One would not want to spoil a lucrative opportunity with undue haste. The lessons he had learned at Alchemy Assets Management stayed with him. One Tuesday afternoon in early August, while he was tracking the tangled history of Thornton's real estate acquisitions, his secretary interrupted him to alert him that he had an unscheduled visitor who SecondActs 4 requested face-time. The visitor was Michael Roque, the manager of Loaves and Fishes Catering, the vendor currently employed by the University. Baldwin knew that, in the normal course of events, any problem that Roque had would go first to Felix Musca, Thornton's Purchasing Agent. This led him to suspect that Roque's problem was probably centered on Musca. This could be amusing. "Doris, give me three minutes and then send Mr. Roque in." He used the lead time to gather up the papers he had been working on, put them in folders and stack these folders on his credenza. There was nothing to be gained by letting Roque know what he was working on. He lighted his second cigar of the day and moved the large, circular glass ashtray closer on his desk. For just a moment, he thought about putting on his suit jacket. Then he reminded himself that Roque was lower down on the food chain and not deserving of such courtesy. There was a timid rapping on the door and then, in response to a prompt, Roque entered. Baldwin remained seated but welcomed his guest. "Michael, what a pleasure to see you. Come in. Have a seat." He gestured across his desk at the pair of side chairs. "And tell me your

problem.” Roque was put off by the greeting. “What makes you think that I have a problem?” Baldwin laughed exuberantly. “Everyone who walks through that door has a problem and they all expect me to solve it. Why should you be any different? How can I help you?” “It’s your boy, Musca. He’s out of line. You need to rein him in.” This response was delivered in a verbal flood and with considerable passion. Roque was disturbed and nearing his boiling point. Henry Baldwin 5 “What has he done?” Baldwin was about to add “this time” but thought better of it. It was too soon to take sides. “I presume you know that each of Thornton’s vendors kicks back ten percent of their fee to the Purchasing Agent. If we do not agree to do that, we don’t get the business. It has become systemic and we factor it into our bid and pass the cost along to our customers.” Baldwin neither confirmed nor denied that he had such knowledge. Instead, he worked his cigar. Roque continued. “Now, without any warning, he has raised the kickback to twenty percent. All the contracts for this academic year have already been signed. The Fall semester begins in a couple of weeks. At this late date, there is no way that I can pass the added cost on to my customers. It’s going to have to come out of my profit margin. I’m going to have to eat it. But I can’t afford that. I won’t pay it. You’ve got to get him to rescind the increase. Otherwise...” His voice tailed off, leaving the threat unspoken. The Vice President knew a cue when he heard one. “Or what? What will you do?” He made a great show of evening the ash on his cigar. “There is an investigative reporter on Channel 6, WHAR-TV. He has a nose for white collar crime. This situation would be right up his alley. And he is no fan of the academic community. You remember that devastating series he did about cheating on standardized exams!” Roque had said more than he intended to. But now, the deed was done, the ugly truth was out for all to see. Baldwin recognized that his immediate role must be that of conciliator. “Michael, you’re talking in the heat of the moment. Do you

really want to drag the University through the mud of another SecondActs 6 public scandal? Why don't you give me a couple of days to see if I can resolve the problem? I'll talk with Musca. This may all be a simple misunderstanding. Why not give me until next Monday? If I'm unsuccessful, then you can do whatever you think necessary. What do you say?" His was the voice of reason in an otherwise unreasonable world. Roque had expected an immediate resolution to his problem and replied with obvious reluctance. "I suppose that another couple of days won't make any difference." What Baldwin had intended as cautionary advice had come across to Roque as an order. "Good man! You did the right thing by calling my attention to this problem. Thanks to you, we should be able to nip it in the bud. Do not lose any more sleep over it." While he spoke, Baldwin ushered Roque to the door. Once it closed behind the caterer, he made his way back to his desk. A small smile flitted across his face. That went better than I expected it would. Word of the increase in the amount of the kickback expected from vendors was not news to Baldwin. He had initiated it. It was Baldwin who had directed Musca to impose the increase. The first ten percent would go to the Purchasing Agent as traditional. The additional ten percent was for the Vice President for Business. He had expected that the initiative would generate some blow back. Now that he knew the direction of the resistance, he was prepared to deal with it. He spun his chair to face the cadenza. From his Ettinger Nut and Blue Heritage St. James Attache Case, he extracted a burner phone and, from memory, punched in the numbers for Lubomyr Tarassov. When the call was answered, he did not waste time identifying himself. Henry Baldwin 7 "That hypothetical problem we discussed the other day, has become an actual one. I want you to fix it permanently. The matter is time sensitive. I will need it completed not later than next Sunday." The words were chosen carefully. In the unlikely event that this phone conversation was being

recorded, there was nothing incriminating. The problem being discussed could have been leaky plumbing in the master-bath. Tarassov was equally guarded in his reply. "Consider it done." With that, he broke the connection. \* \* \* \* To call Lubomyr Tarassov a plumber, a mechanic, or some other tradesman would be doing him a considerable disservice. The man was a gifted artist who worked in a most unusual medium. He knew several hundred different ways to dispatch someone from this world and into the afterlife without raising suspicions. He could imitate a heart attack or mimic a stroke without leaving any forensic evidence. He could arrange a fatal traffic event, and no one would even think that it was anything more than a tragic accident. Some deaths could be staged as very convincing suicides. Others were clearly attributable to bad luck or poor planning. After all, many people died each day, some of them in most peculiar, or even bizarre, circumstances. Surely, not all of them could be attributed to foul play. That level of paranoia had not yet arrived. On occasion, it was necessary for a death to appear as what it was, a deliberate execution. Usually, this was done to send a message to some of the survivors. Thus, a death by radiation poisoning is difficult to pass off as natural or accidental. Whether the radioactive SecondActs 8 material is introduced by stabbing with a coated ferrule on the end of an umbrella, or by slipping it into a pot of tea, it is almost impossible to disguise it convincingly as anything else. Baldwin's call had come at a most opportune time. Tarassov had recently received a small sample of a new nerve agent from his cousin, Igor Borovsky. Igor was working at a biochemical research facility northeast of Moscow. The agent was labelled VXC and the chemical structure indicated that it was a thiophosphonate, a relative of the classical VX toxins, with variations mainly in the nature, length, and branching of the side-chains. Igor claimed that VXC was ten times as toxic as the original VX while boiling at 250 degrees Centigrade, fifty degrees lower than the parent

compound. Tarassov understood that there were two reasons for the gift. First, Igor was showing off again. Second, his cousin was certain that Tarassov would be unable to resist testing the new agent, and, if suitably impressed, there was a chance that he might invest in a larger quantity. With Igor, no gift was ever simply a gift. On Wednesday morning, after Michael Roque had left for work, Tarassov showed up at Roque's apartment disguised as a television repairman, hauling a heavy valise that presumably contained his tools and testing equipment. When no one answered the door, he let himself in. He left his bag just inside the door and made a careful reconnaissance of the premises, with special attention to the kitchen. Tarassov noted a tea kettle on the back, left-hand burner of the stove. That suggested that it was in regular use. In the dishwasher, there were several pots, pans, bowls, and plates, waiting for the completion of the load. In the refrigerator, he found a Pyrex casserole, containing a half-rack of ribs and a substantial sweet potato, ready to Henry Baldwin 9 pop into the oven for dinner. There were three more casseroles in the freezer. He was already aware that Roque was a bachelor, but now he knew that the man cared enough to do his own cooking, entirely appropriate for someone who made his living as a caterer. A spare bedroom had been converted into a home office and the accumulated paperwork on the desk suggested that it saw a lot of use. On the floor, in the knee-hole of the desk, there was a small Sunbeam space heater, clear evidence that these older buildings could be cold and drafty. He now knew exactly what he had to do. Returning to his valise, he opened it and extracted a Haz-Mat suit with a portable supply of oxygen. When he was completely dressed, and the suit checked for leaks, he removed from the valise two more items: a box containing the vial of VXC and a camel's hair brush. He returned to the kitchen and began his painting. First was the underside of the tea kettle. Next, the coils of the stove-top burners. Then, he went into the oven and painted

the heating coils. The bottom of the Pyrex dish holding tonight's dinner was next. Then, he moved on to the home office and painted the heating elements in the space heater. With the last of the nerve agent, he painted as many of the incandescent lightbulbs as he could. The empty vial and the brush went back into the box and it was returned to the valise. He checked the apartment carefully to make sure that he had left no evidence of his intrusion. Now came the tricky part. While holding his breath, he got out of the protective suit and stowed it in the valise and exited the apartment. The valise and its contents were consigned to the building's incinerator. SecondActs 10 Tarassov went home and took a long, hot shower. Then, he went out to his favorite restaurant and treated himself to a fine lunch. Only time would tell if his work of the morning had been successful. \* \* \* \* When Roque did not show up for work on Wednesday, his staff took notice but were otherwise unconcerned. The relaxed supervision appealed to them. Everyone got to go home early that afternoon. There was no sign of him by Friday morning and no explanation had been forthcoming. Calls to his cell phone went directly to voice mail. Now they began to worry. When a workaholic breaks his routine, something is wrong. Roque's secretary called Joseph Kiszka, the superintendent and owner of the apartment building where Roque lived, and asked him to check. There was no response to Kiszka's loud knocking on the apartment door. He let himself in with his master-key, announcing his presence in a loud voice. No one responded. Kiszka immediately got a bad feeling. The smell of death hung heavy in the air like an early morning fog before the sun rises to burn it off. He knew that smell from his multiple tours of duty with the National Guard during the Gulf Wars. He had hoped never to smell it again. He did the natural thing and opened some windows to air the place out. Then he searched the apartment for what he was afraid he was going to find. Michael Roque lay dead in his bed. Rigor had come and gone. He had

been dead for a while and was beginning to decay. Probably, he had passed in his sleep. Kiszka crossed himself, muttered a few prayers for the deceased, and then called 9-1-1. While he waited, he did some rough calculations on the cost of clearing the apartment, Henry Baldwin 11 repainting it, and getting it rented again. Painting would get rid of the smell, but the morbid history of the unit would linger longer, making it more difficult to find a new tenant. His bottom-line was going to take a big hit. Bummer! When the Police arrived, they determined two things very quickly: there had been no forced entry into the apartment and the body bore no signs of violence. Their preliminary conclusion was Death by Natural Causes. The Medical Examiner concurred. Roque had simply stopped breathing. Death by asphyxia was the obvious explanation. There was no need for further examination. Case closed. Thus, another opportunity to learn the truth slipped away