Some repeated noises seem to erupt with numbers, making the chatter of counting, a kind of syncopation that turns bop-bop into one-two. But, staring out of the window of Vic Scaduto's office at the rear of the Embassy, I was only dimly aware that I was hearing a noise at all. I seemed to be hearing the words three-four-five. It was only after I saw the policeman hurry out of the glass booth near our staff garage that I realized that what I had heard were gunshots.

'What is it?' Scaduto said.

He had just been telling me about meeting the father of Hussein Something-or-other, one of his kids' school friends – at least he had thought the man was a parent, an unusually friendly guy among all those snobs at the school rugby match – and he turned out to be Hussein's bodyguard and chauffeur! 'Hey, listen, Arabs are Jews on horseback –'

'It sounded like gunfire,' I said.

Blackburne's Mews was very still for several minutes, and then it was awash with scrambling policemen setting up barriers at the mews's entrance and blocking Culross Street. I heard the earsplitting donkey hee-haw of a British police siren.

Scaduto had joined me at the window. His ears twitched; the hairline of his scalp gave a little jerk. He shaped his mouth as if preparing to take a bite.

'Libyans,' he said.

We had had an urgent memo about Libyans earlier that week. Teams of gunmen had been dispatched by the wild-eyed President Qaddafi. We had been sent blurred pictures of the mustached assassins.

Scaduto's phone rang. Panic invests commonplace objects with menace. He picked the receiver up with fearful fingers – would the thing explode? He listened for perhaps twenty seconds. He said, 'We've been expecting something like this,' and then he replaced the receiver gently, again behaving as if it were explosive.

'There's been a shooting,' he told me solemnly. 'Stay inside and keep away from the windows. Those are orders. It might be Arabs. That was Horton on the phone.'

‘It was right down there,’ I said, pointing into the mews.

‘You’re a witness.’

‘I didn’t see anything,’ I said.

Scaduto said, ‘I’m glad they didn’t give me Rome. It’s worse there.’

While he phoned his wife I tried to determine what the police were doing with their chalk marks on the surface of the mews. It looked like the beginning of a children’s game.

‘I’m not kidding, honey. I heard the shots,’ he was saying. ‘Hey, I’m glad they didn’t give me that Rome job. It’s an everyday thing there. Sure, it’s terrorists! No, don’t worry. I can take care of myself.’

He looked pleased, even smug, when he hung up. ‘How about a drink?’ he said. ‘Someone’s bound to have the poop on this downstairs.’

The bar-restaurant in the Embassy basement had no windows, and it was perhaps this and the semidarkness that suggested a hide-out or bomb shelter to me. It was full of huddled, whispering Embassy employees rather enjoying their fear.

‘Reminds me of when I was in Rawalpindi,’ Scaduto said, still looking pleased. He went for two beers and returned with the name of the man who had been fired upon – Dwight Yorty, a relatively new man in Regional Projects, whom I had never met.

‘I shouldn’t laugh,’ Scaduto said.

But near-disasters, especially when an intended victim seems to have been miraculously reprieved, are often the occasions for lively gossip.

‘Yorty!’ Scaduto said. ‘A month or so ago, he told me the most amazing story. He hit his wife over the head. She fell down, wham, flat on the floor. Go ahead, ask me what he hit her with.’

‘What was the weapon, Vic?’

‘A cucumber,’ he said, pressing his teeth against his smile. ‘Isn’t that incredible? You’d think he’d use something sensible, like a sledgehammer. But they were having an argument about cucumbers at the time. He had it in his hand, then he hauled off and belted her with it.’

‘You can’t do much damage with a cucumber,’ I said.

‘It paralyzed her!’ Scaduto was tipping forward in his chair, trying not to laugh. ‘That’s what she said – she couldn’t move. An ambulance came to take her away on a stretcher. The stretcher wouldn’t fit through the kitchen door. She had to get up and walk into the hallway and lie down on it. That’s the funny part.’

I said, ‘That’s not the only funny part.’

‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘Ask me what happened to the cucumber.’

‘You’ll tell me anyway.’

‘He ate it!’ Scaduto said. ‘That’s what they were arguing about. She didn’t want him to eat the cucumber, so he whacked her over the head with it and then he ate it. He didn’t count on her faking brain damage. You don’t believe this, do you?’

‘It sounds a little far-fetched.’

‘If you were married you’d believe it,’ he said. ‘You’d think it was an understatement. This kind of thing happens all the time to married people.’

‘But shootings don’t,’ I said. ‘Someone just tried to kill Yorty. Maybe it was his wife.’

‘No. His wife left him – she’s in the States. Poor guy.’ Now Scaduto looked contrite. ‘I shouldn’t have told you that cucumber story. But that’s all I know about him.’

The next morning, Ambassador Noyes gave the senior officers a briefing.

The crueler ones among us called him ‘No-Yes.’ He was a tall white-faced man with thin pale hair and the stiffness and exaggerated sense of decorum that you often associate with people of low intelligence. He often said he liked gold an awful lot. He had the shoulders and the plodding gait of a golfer. He had no interest in politics and had never before held a diplomatic post. But he was a personal friend of the President, and this post of US Ambassador to Britain was regarded by many people as membership in the ultimate country club. It was expensive, but it offered real status. It also proved that money could buy practically anything.

Ambassador Noyes had another trait I had noticed in many slow-witted people: he was tremendously interested in philosophy.

‘I guess you’ve all heard about the shooting,’ he was saying. ‘As far as I’m concerned, this is just about the most serious thing that’s happened since I took up this post.’

Although he was nervous and rather new, he did not find his a difficult job. His

number two man, Everett Horton, was a career diplomat who had been in London ten years and had wonderful sources. And of course the eight hundred of us at the London Embassy were each working toward the same end: to prop up the Ambassador and put him in the know. I could think of twenty people who were directly responsible to the Ambassador. There was Horton, Brickhouse, Kneedler and Roscoe, besides Scaduto, Sanger and Jeeps. There was Pomeroy, MacWeeney, Geach, Baskies, Pryczinski and Frezza, Schoonmaker, Kelly, Kountz and Toomajian, Shinebald and Oberlander. There was me. There were the boys on the third floor. And that was just the inner circle. We were at his service; we were his eyes and ears; we were the best, most of us overqualified for the jobs we were doing. How could he fail?

'I'm determined to get to the bottom of it,' he went on. 'I want to show these people – whoever they are – that we are not afraid of anyone, and that we are, if provoked, quite able to hit back.'

He was a reasonable man. He was also a multimillionaire. How he had made his fortune was a mystery to me, but it was no mystery to me how he had kept it. He was unprejudiced and fair; he gave everyone a hearing; he was also unsentimental. I suspected he was strong. He was certainly practical, and I knew from the way he lived that he was a simple soul. He knew how to delegate power and how to take decisions. I was sure he knew his weaknesses – if he hadn't, he would not have been so successful.

All this is necessary background – I mean, the reasonableness of his character – because his next words were very fierce indeed.

'When I find out who did this, I can promise you that it'll be the last time they try it. We're going to jump on them hard. Our flag will not be insulted.'

The mention of 'flag' put me in mind of Dwight Yorty and the cucumber, and I lowered my eyes as I listened to Ambassador Noyes's tremulous voice.

'I spoke to the President last night and he assured me that he will support us to the hilt. I don't have to tell you gentlemen that we are more than a match for anyone who takes up arms against us.'

This was fighting talk. We muttered our approval, and there was a little burst of appreciative handclapping. But I could tell that the response was mixed. The older men seemed very pleased at the prospect of kicking someone's teeth in. The younger men and all the women were clearly irked by the threats. Most of us judged the Ambassador to be uncharacteristically credulous. Perhaps he was trying to make an impression by swearing revenge. I wondered how it would sound after it was leaked to the press.

Everett Horton spoke next. At times like this he was captain of the team rather than

coach. He was correct, modest, loyal, and deferential. He gave a good imitation of controlled anger – I doubted that he had been angry at all. His voice expressed intense indignation.

‘The Ambassador has been forthright – and with reason. This is the sixth terrorist incident involving American Embassy personnel in the past two months. It is the first one we’ve had in London. Obviously, there’s a movement afoot in Europe to frighten us.’ He paused and said, ‘I’m not frightened, but I’m kind of mad.’

Ambassador Noyes smiled in agreement at this, and some of us shuffled our feet in embarrassment.

‘One American has been killed, and another wounded – both in Paris,’ Horton said. ‘Three incidents have been kept out of the papers, as you know. But the Ambassador has decided, and I agree, that this attempt on the life of one of our serving officers should be given maximum publicity.’

He then read us the press release, with the details of the shooting: At approximately fifteen-thirty hours … Dwight A. Yorty fired upon … unknown assailant … believed to be political. He showed us a street map of the Embassy neighborhood, and as he took us through it step by step, he looked more and more like a quarterback explaining a game plan that had gone wrong.

‘Any questions?’

No hands went up, perhaps because the Ambassador was in the room, standing behind Horton with his arms folded, ready for battle.

I decided to risk a question. I stood up and said, ‘Everett, you called it a terrorist incident. Have we any proof of that?’

Before Horton could speak, the Ambassador stepped forward. ‘A man was terrorized – shot at,’ he said. ‘There’s only one sort of person who does that. Everett?’

‘I think we’re in total agreement, Mr Ambassador,’ Horton said.

I was still standing. I said, ‘What I meant was, has any group like the IRA or the PLO or Black September – or anyone – claimed credit for it?’

My question exasperated the Ambassador. He sighed and stepped away, seeing me as an obstruction. He said, ‘I’ll let you field that one, Everett.’

‘No terrorist group has come forward,’ Horton said. ‘In one of the Paris shootings the same pattern was followed – an unknown assailant. But it wasn’t robbery in either of

the incidents. It's got to be political.'

Now Oberlander was on his feet. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'but isn't it somewhat premature to call this shooting political?'

'No,' Horton said, 'because we've got a good description of the man. Dark hair, dark eyes, swarthy features, a slight build, about five-foot-six. Arab. He may be the same man who was responsible for those Paris incidents. We're sure they're linked. And frankly' – Horton made a half-turn toward the Ambassador – 'I'd love to nail him.'

Al Sanger said, 'What about the guy who was picked up right after the shooting?'

This was news to me.

'He was released,' Horton said. 'He didn't fit Yorty's description.'

'I hope you won't find this question malicious,' Erroll Jeeps said, 'but how was it the guy took six or seven shots at point-blank range and missed?'

'Five shots,' I said.

Horton said, 'We haven't found any of the cartridges, so we don't know how many shots. Maybe it was one. Apparently he missed because Yorty was parking his car at the time – in the staff garage.'

'Instead of looking for cartridges,' Sanger said, 'why not look for the slugs?'

'That is up to the British police, who, so far, have done a superb job,' Horton said.

Horton repeated that we would not give in to intimidation, and the Ambassador refolded his arms in defiant emphasis. And he fixed his jaw and nodded stiffly as Horton advised us to take all necessary precautions. If any of us had reason to think we were under threat, he said, we could apply for police protection.

Erroll Jeeps said, 'These British cops don't have guns but they got some real loud whistles.'

'We'll ignore that remark, Mr Jeeps,' Horton said. 'In the meantime, remember, the best defense is a good offense. Thank you, gentlemen.'

And then, unexpectedly, I was asked to leak it to the British press. I had been very doubtful about the whole affair, but what made my nagging questions the more urgent was the Ambassador's request, relayed by Horton, for me to see a reliable journalist on the Telegraph or The Times and spell it out.

I said I would need time to think about it.

‘Thinking is not necessary in this case,’ Horton said. ‘I just want you to give an accurate summary of our attitude. You were at the briefing.’

‘The whole team was there.’

‘You were taking notes,’ he said. ‘I saw you.’

‘I was writing down questions, and wishing I had answers to them.’

‘You asked questions. I gave you answers.’

‘I didn’t ask you the most important one, because I thought Yorty might be in the room. I didn’t want him to feel he was on trial.’

‘Ask me now, if it’ll make you feel better.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Yorty didn’t see the gunman. I re-enacted the shooting with Scaduto standing in Culross Street. If Yorty was in the garage – and he must have been, because I was right above him – there is no way that he could have seen the man who was shooting at him.’

Horton said, ‘That’s a statement, not a question.’

‘This is my question,’ I said. ‘He didn’t see the gunman, so how was Yorty able to supply you with a description of him?’

‘Your premise is false,’ Horton said. ‘Therefore, the question doesn’t arise. He saw the man. That’s how he gave us a description.’

‘Couldn’t have – impossible. And that’s the problem, because it leaves us with two answers to the question. And both of them put Yorty in a bad light.’

‘Yorty’s a married man with a spotless record,’ Horton said crossly.

‘His wife’s in London?’

‘She’s on sick leave,’ Horton said. ‘I don’t know why I’m answering these questions.’

I said, ‘Listen. He gave you a description because he knew the gunman beforehand, and he didn’t have to see him to describe him accurately. That’s the first possibility.’

‘If Dwight Yorty was the sort of man who ran around with that sort of person, I think the boys on the third floor would know about it.’

I ignored this. ‘The second possibility is that because Yorty knew the gunman, he deliberately didn’t describe him accurately. In which case, he doesn’t want us to catch the guy.’

‘You just sit there assuming that Yorty knows this killer!’ Horton said. ‘That’s incredible!’

‘He definitely knew him,’ I said.

‘Prove it.’

‘Because he definitely didn’t see him, and he definitely gave us a description of the man.’

Horton said, ‘This is interesting. Thinking always is. It’s fun, let’s face it. But you’re not paid to contradict the Ambassador. I can tell you he’s really mad. He knows that I’m asking you to pass this along to the press.’ Horton put his fingertips together and flexed them. ‘And when he opens his paper in a few days he will expect to see an accurate version of his point of view, not a garbled mess that impugns the honesty of a serving officer –’

I wanted to say: Yorty hit his wife over the head with a cucumber, and then he ate it, and now she’s trying to sue him for brain damage.

I said, ‘I’d like to know a little more about the man who was picked up after the shooting.’

‘He didn’t fit Yorty’s description,’ Horton said. ‘He was released.’

‘Yorty’s description doesn’t really count, because he didn’t see the gunman. The suspect was seen running down Park Street.’

‘Jogging,’ Horton said. ‘He was a jogger.’

‘That’s useful. He’s athletic. It could explain the gun. A runner might have access to a starter’s pistol – one that shoots blanks.’

‘Just because no cartridges were found doesn’t mean that no shots were fired.’

‘True,’ I said, ‘but no bullet holes were found either. No slugs. No marks on the garage walls.’

Horton said, ‘You’ve been working overtime.’

‘I was looking out the window when it happened. I didn’t see anything. Yorty couldn’t have seen anything.’

And he hit his wife with a cucumber and she called it attempted murder.

‘I’m glad you’ve told me all of this speculation,’ Horton said, ‘because if any of it gets into the paper I’ll know who to blame. Maybe someone else should be found to leak the story.’

‘No, no,’ I said. ‘I want to do it – please let me. Just give me a little time. I’ve got to find the right paper, one that the wire services will pick up on.’

Horton smiled. ‘Remember, you’re doing this for the Ambassador. He didn’t like your performance at the briefing – you asked too many questions. He’ll be watching you.’

‘Do you trust me, coach?’ I hated saying the word, but with Horton it always worked.

‘Of course I do.’

‘I’ll do exactly what I’m told,’ I said. ‘But I’d appreciate it if you’d ask Yorty one question on my behalf. There’s no harm in asking. It might even be a good idea. After all, since we’re accusing Libya of sponsoring an assassination attempt, we really ought to have most of the facts. And it’s a simple question.’

‘Go ahead,’ Horton said.

‘Just this – and it would help if you reminded him that it doesn’t matter whether he swears on a stack of Bibles that he’s telling the truth, because this fact is checkable. It concerns the man who was picked up right after the shooting, the one you said was innocent. Has Yorty ever seen him before?’

‘What if he says yes?’

‘Then that’s your man, because Yorty didn’t see him at the time of the shooting. He knew him – perhaps very well, perhaps so well that he wanted to hide the fact.’

Horton said, ‘Then why did the guy try to kill him?’

‘He didn’t,’ I said. ‘Only ex-lovers shoot to kill.’

Two days passed, and on the morning of the third I entered my office, to find Everett

Horton seated at my desk.

He said, ‘Have you leaked the story yet?’

‘Not yet,’ I said, but in fact I’d had no intention of doing so until we had all the information, which was why I was so eager to take sole responsibility for it.

‘That’s a relief,’ Horton said.

‘He answered the question,’ I said.

Horton nodded. ‘Yorty is leaving us,’ he said. ‘He’s leaving the Foreign Service, too. And his wife is leaving him – already left him, so I understand.’

‘I feel sorry for him,’ I said.

‘Forget it,’ Horton said. ‘The Ambassador wants to see you. Don’t bring up the incident in our backyard to him. He was impressed, I think, by your tenacity, but it’s rather a sore point.’

Ambassador Noyes said, ‘I was wondering whether you’re free to join us for dinner on the twenty-first. We’d like to see you at Winfield House.’

‘I accept with pleasure.’

He said, ‘The Prime Minister will be there.’

So that was my reward.