

**THE  
STARTING NOTE**

GEORGES KASSABGI

Copyright © 2012 Georges Kassabgi

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012941606

Cover by Sandy Martin

Designed and printed in the United States of America.

SMALL BATCH BOOKS  
AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS

# PART ONE



# ONE

Tuesday, January 23

Up until 10 a.m., the residents and passersby on Manhattan's East Sixty-Third Street between Fifth and Madison avenues were enjoying an unseasonably warm and sunny winter day. Wealthy people lived in this part of the city. The neighborhood shops and businesses, like the Carpe Diem Market on the southeast corner and the Utopia Bistro next to it, were frequented by the well-heeled. This was a trendy, upscale district, where crime almost never occurred and the residents' activities were seldom disturbed by the scream of sirens.

One minute later, the picture changed.

A loud noise echoed painfully off the canyon walls of East Sixty-Third Street, like after an explosion. The sudden impact was followed by metal parts bouncing fifteen feet in the air. They then fell back onto a large heap of shattered wood with another crash. Steel strings, released from a tension of ten tons or more, sang and screeched in freedom. Even as the noise abated, the monster howled, then growled, then whined, then hummed, holding on to life and sound.

A piano had dropped from the sky, forever shattering the wealthy denizens' sense of safety.

Was the force that pushed a Steinway grand out of the apartment of one of the area's residents already around us from long before, just waiting for the right sunny day to wreak havoc? When did this noise really begin?

But at that moment, the people on the sidewalks of Sixty-Third Street didn't have time to ponder philosophical questions. They stood and gaped. They shouted and ran. They keyed 9-1-1 on their cell phones. They held their hands over their ears. The crash of wood and metal, the smash of glass!

The owner of the Carpe Diem Market came out onto the sidewalk, wiping his hands on his apron. He shook his head and muttered, "Hell of a note."

A cab stopped in the middle of the street and the driver rolled open his window. "Holy shit!" he shouted. "The car! What a mess!"

An NYPD patrol car barreled in from one end of the block, and both an ambulance and a Fire Department rescue truck arrived from the other. The vehicles screeched to a stop, sirens groaning. Senior Patrol Officer Denver and Officer Forrest hurried out. They raced to the scene of destruction, then stood still, shaking their heads. The rescue team was right behind them. One of the EMTs peered under the wreckage and shouted, "We'll need the Jaws of Life. Stat! We have a victim."

"Call Dispatch," Officer Denver told his partner. "We're going to need crime scene investigators and a detective team."

"You suspect foul play?" Forrest asked.

"I got no idea. But what happened to whoever was in that car wasn't fair, that's for sure."

Across the street at the other end of the block, in the Utopia Bistro, a youngish-looking, clean-shaven, stout man finished his espresso, closed his briefcase, and stood up. He walked out the restaurant and tapped on the window of the cab that had not moved. The driver shook his head, then nodded. The man opened the door and got in.

They drove off quietly.

"Professor, did you ever imagine when you were in police academy that you'd wind up spending 90 percent of your career shoveling paperwork?" Lieutenant Claire Freight pushed her chair back from the desk. "I mean,

what's the point in being part of a violent crimes unit in a precinct where nothing ever happens?"

Detective First Class Chet Drowly smiled indulgently at his partner and superior officer. "Be grateful," he said. "You want to spend your time dodging bullets on a rooftop? Chasing serial killers through the sewers?"

"Sounds like fun," Claire answered. "Some action. All I've been doing lately is approving budgets and requisitioning desk equipment, for God's sake."

"It's wintertime, Claire," the younger officer reminded her. "It's warm inside."

Claire stretched. "Warm outside, too, at least today. I don't feel like being a slug for a living."

Chet didn't think she looked like a mollusk. Quite the contrary. Lieutenant Claire Freight was tall, comely, and tough. No makeup, short-cropped blond hair going gray on the sides. She kept her athletic body in shape, and she wore a squint that meant business. In all the time he'd known her, Chet Drowly had seldom heard her laugh out loud, but he knew she had a sense of irony.

"I want to get something done," she continued. "I took this job to serve and protect the people of New York. For me that means more than investigating petty thefts in shopping malls and tracking down graffiti artists. How long has it been since we dealt with a real crime, Professor? A simple homicide, for example?"

Chet didn't much care for his partner's nickname for him, but he knew it was meant as a compliment. In fact, he was known in the precinct for his dedication to uncovering the truth of a matter through the determination of all its causes. "Not long enough."

"What's the matter? Don't like dead bodies?"

"I'm thirty-nine years old, married, with a house in Hempstead that's almost paid off. Why should I be in a hurry to deal with dead bodies?"

"Without death, Chet, we're stuck indoors, with paperwork." She

reached across her desk for the coffee cup and stood up. “You want some more coffee?”

“Nah. I need to cut down.”

“Besides, the only way to get promoted around here is to solve violent crimes.”

“I’ll tell that to Betsy. She keeps asking when I’ll get a raise, when I’ll make lieutenant. I’ll tell her more innocent victims will make life better for her.”

Claire smiled. Chet smiled back. They were a good team: the woman of action and the man who knows how to think. She got them moving, and he kept them going in the right direction. They may not have had a lot of hard-boiled cases since they transferred downtown from the Twenty-Fifth Precinct, but they had no unsolved crimes to apologize for—thanks to her energy, and thanks to his questions about how or why or where each crime began.

Claire was on her way to the coffee pot in the corner of the precinct room when Investigations Chief James Warren walked through the door. “Don’t pour that, Freight. You guys are going out.”

Claire returned to her desk. “Yeah? What’s up?”

Warren consulted the clipboard in his hand and said, “East Sixty-Third Street, between Fifth and Madison. An unusual incident that may get blown up by the media if we don’t act quickly.”

Chet got up and reached for his sport coat from the chair beside his desk. “What’s the situation, Chief?”

“Possible break-and-enter. Property damage. And, uh—”

“Another routine disturbance?” Claire asked.

“I wouldn’t call it routine,” Warren replied. He wagged his ballpoint pen with two fingers. “We have a victim.”

“Dead?”

“Seriously dead.”

“Homicide?”



“Hard to tell.”

“Weapon?”

Chief Warren chuckled. “You aren’t going to believe this.”

Freight and Drowly drove past the crime scene barricade and parked their Ford Explorer SUV in front of the apartment building. They stared at what might be recorded as yet another one of those strange incidents that seem to happen only in New York.

They got out of their vehicle and walked over to the wreckage. Scraps of debris were being catalogued and piled on tarps. They saw a heap of what looked like very expensive wood and pieces of what seemed to have been a navy blue Mercedes. Shards of glass sparkled on the pavement halfway down the block.

Chet recognized the first responders, Denver and Forrest. He also knew the crime scene investigators by name: Fina Fresca was taking photos, and Ash Mazake was dusting for prints. “So what do we have here, Ed?”

“I’ve talked to four witnesses who happened to be standing across the street. The victim was a sorry sight by the time the rescue team pried her out of the wreck. I swear to God, she looked like a plate of lasagna. She’s now being moved to the morgue. We got her driver’s license and car registration. Name is Meredith Thomas. Female. Age thirty-six. From Aurora, Ohio, wherever the hell that is. Welcome to New York, Mrs. Thomas. That’ll teach you to park illegally.”

“The car was parked with the driver in it?”

“Yeah, in a private space. Assigned to the owner of one of the apartments, Nikki Grumi. Up there—”

“You mean Nikki Grumi the writer?” Chet interrupted.

“That’s the one.”

“I’ve just finished rereading her first novel,” Chet said. “Coincidence?”

Ed Denver interjected. “Get this. That pile of trash there? That’s what’s left of Nikki Grumi’s piano.”

“Horrible. So where’s Grumi now?”

“You tell me and we’ll both know. You’d better talk to the building super. He’s on his way. For now, the only one who knows anything is the doorman.” Denver checked his notepad. “Robert Sullivan. The victim’s car was parked illegally in Grumi’s private spot, and the piano fell or was pushed off her balcony.”

Claire Freight joined them in time to hear the last words. “That’s crazy,” she interrupted. “Who keeps a grand piano on their balcony? In winter? Come on.”

“Nobody, Lieutenant,” Denver said. “From what we have on the ground, the piano was on wheels. As you can see up there, the balcony railing still has parts hanging. Plus, there’s all this shattered glass, so I’d say the piano rolled through the sliding doors of the balcony.”

“Can we assume it was pushed?”

“Sure. We’re going over all the wood for prints, but so far—”

Chet asked, “What do you mean, sure? How do you know the piano was pushed?”

“Well, jeez, Detective. How often does a piano just happen to roll off the top floor of an apartment building?”

“Has anybody been in the apartment yet?” Freight asked.

“Nope. No response when we knocked. The tenant’s away, according to Sullivan. We’re waiting for the super to join us and open the place up.”

“Okay. Chet, get the logbook and a consent-to-search form. Let’s go talk to the doorman until the super shows up. The forensics guys have enough to keep them busy.”

Chet and Claire walked through the front entrance of the building and then up the all-weather red carpet to the brass-and-glass door, where they were met by a man dressed like the leader of a marching band—dark-blue slacks with gold piping, a matching double-breasted coat with mother-of-pearl buttons and gold epaulettes, wine-red cap, and gloves.

“You Mr. Sullivan?” Claire asked.

“That’s me, Officer.” Chet knew the look on the doorman’s face: trying to show he was in control, but barely concealing a panic brought on by sudden chaos. “What can I do for you?”

“Let’s start by you telling us exactly what you saw this morning,” Chet answered. “The whole story.”

Sullivan’s face seemed to crumble before their eyes. “Aw, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, it was awful! I’m standing here, doing my job, and out of nowhere this, this *piano* drops out of the sky, right before my eyes. On top of that car, and my first thought was, Oh, poor Mr. Cambric!”

Claire asked, “Who’s Mr. Cambric? What does he have to do with this?”

“Well, see, I thought for certain that it was Mr. Cambric who was killed by that thing. For God’s sake! What’s this world coming to?”

Chet muttered, “Better question is, where has it been?”

“Later, Professor,” Claire snapped. “Mr. Sullivan, who is Mr. Cambric, and why did you think he was the victim?”

“Well, Jim Cambric just happens to be Mrs. Grumi’s gentleman friend. And he drives a Mercedes Benz. The same dark color! Mrs. Grumi lets him park in her personal spot, see. That’s Mrs. Grumi’s own parking spot. She rents it by the month, and nobody gets to park in it but her and sometimes Mr. Cambric, who’s been away for a while. At any rate, I thought for sure that was Mr. Cambric’s car. Otherwise, I would have gone out and told the owner to scram. But I didn’t, and now she’s dead, and it’s my fault because I wasn’t doing my job. Oh God, forgive me!”

“Take it easy, sir,” Claire said. “I understand you’re the one who identified the piano as belonging to Nikki Grumi. How do you know that for sure?”

“There’s only two pianos in the building,” the doorman answered, calming down slightly. “The other one’s on the second floor. Mrs. Grumi’s piano was a bitch to move in. It had to be lifted by a giant crane, and then we had to remove the balcony doors to get it inside.”

“Where’s Mrs. Grumi now, do you know?” Chet asked.

“Out of town, is all I know. She told me she’d be gone for a couple of

weeks.”

“Do you have contact information for her there?” Claire asked. “Address, phone number?”

Robert Sullivan shook his head sadly. “You’ll have to ask the super, Mr. Fellows. He’s the guy in charge here; the one the owners’ association trusts to do their work. I called him and he’s on his way. Jesus, I could have sworn that was Mr. Cambric’s car!”

Chet said, “If that had been Jim Cambric’s Mercedes, you wouldn’t have gone out and asked him to move, would you?”

“Heck no.”

“So if that had been Cambric in the car, he’d be dead.”

“That’s right.”

“And it wouldn’t be your fault.”

“No, I guess not.”

“I don’t think you have anything to feel guilty about.”

Robert Sullivan blew his nose and gave Chet a shaky smile.

Claire said, “Now if you’ll let us through the door, we’re going to go up to the seventh floor and poke around. Please send Mr. Fellows up as soon as he gets here.”

The doorman gestured at a man. “Here comes Mr. Fellows now. He’ll open the apartment for you.”

As they waited for the elevator, Sebastian Fellows glowered and told the police officers he didn’t like disturbances in his building. “This is a respectable neighborhood,” he said. “People don’t go destroying property around here like they do in other parts of the city.”

“Is Mrs. Grumi what you’d call a respectable tenant?” Lieutenant Freight asked.

“Never had any problems with her. She’s a quiet type. Writer. Works a lot. Keeps to herself.”

“Does she have friends? Enemies that you know of?”

“How would I know? She’s a private person. She obeys the rules and

tips at Christmas. That's all I care about. I mind my own business, Officer."

"I respect that, Mr. Fellows. But this is a crime scene, and we have a job to do here. Do you know where Mrs. Grumi is now?"

"I don't, but probably at her cottage in Vermont. She goes there a lot, though why anyone would want to go to the sticks in Vermont in the middle of winter is beyond me."

The elevator door opened, and the three of them entered. The super pushed "7," and the door shut. They remained silent as the elevator climbed, and when the door opened again they walked out into an elegant hallway with a hardwood floor and a quality runner.

When they reached 7G, the super rattled a set of keys until he found the right one.

The apartment door directly opposite 7G opened, and a tiny, ancient woman stepped out into the hallway. "Mr. Fellows," she said in a voice twice her size, "what in the world is going on?"

"Sorry for the disturbance, Mrs. Rogers."

"There have been policemen in the hall. I saw them through my peephole. This is the first time in our building. I'm worried." She turned to the detectives and asked, "And who are you two?"

Claire smiled, reached into the handbag slung over her shoulder, and pulled out the leather case containing her badge. "We're police officers, ma'am. I apologize for the disturbance. All is under control. Would you mind if Officer Drowly here asks you a few questions?"

Chet gave Mrs. Rogers the most charming smile he could muster, and it worked. The old woman said, "Goodness me. Well, come on in, young man. Hurry. Don't let the cat out."

Claire winked at her partner. "Join me when you're done."

Chet followed Mrs. Rogers into 7H and shut the door behind him. They sat in her living room, where a small ginger cat jumped onto Chet's lap.

"That's Elsie!" exclaimed the old woman.

Chet gave Elsie a gentle scratch behind her ears, then returned to the business at hand. "Where did Mrs. Grumi go, Mrs. Rogers? Do you know?"

"Her cottage in East Athena, Vermont. Nikki told me she had some rewriting to do and she needed to get away from the city. She often hides away to work."

"Do you happen to know her phone number up there?"

"She told me she does not have a telephone there."

"What sort of neighbor is Mrs. Grumi, would you say?"

"Nikki? Nicest young woman in the world. She's famous, you know, but she's so modest. She's written six books. I haven't read them myself. What did you say your name was?"

"Drowly," Chet answered. "Chet. Did Nikki introduce you to Mr. Cambric? And does she have any other close friends we can contact? Maybe these people can help us get in touch with her somehow, to let her know her apartment has been vandalized."

"Vandalized!"

The cat, startled by the old woman's sudden outburst, jumped off Chet's lap and skittered out of the room.

"I'm afraid so, ma'am. Her piano was destroyed."

"Oh, how horrible! Nikki loves that piano!"

"Loved," Chet said. "She wouldn't love it now."

The old woman buried her face in her hands.

"Mrs. Rogers. Please, could you tell me about Nikki Grumi's family and friends?"

"Yes, yes. Nikki lives alone. No family anywhere. Her ex-husband lives in Italy, I think. Her parents died in an automobile accident when she was a teenager. No brothers or sisters since she never mentioned them. Yes, I met her friend, Jim Cambric, but he hasn't been around for about a month, probably tied up with business abroad. I can't recall just now the details of my conversation with Nikki when we last met a few days ago. Oh, her publisher used to come by quite regularly but he now seems to visit less.

Anyway, that's what Nikki shared with me."

"No other visitors?"

"Well, there are three gentlemen who come over to play bridge or listen to her piano playing. Old friends from college, Nikki told me. But I can't remember their names."

Detective Drowly stood up and said, "Thanks for your time, Mrs. Rogers. I'll let myself out. I'll leave my card on your table in case you remember a detail you think we should know."

"Would you like me to open her door? I have a copy of the keys. I go there to water the plants, and Elsie loves to be with Nikki."

"Mr. Fellows has already opened that door. Thanks again, Mrs. Rogers."

Chet closed the apartment door behind him and walked across the hall into 7G. The apartment was clean and sparsely furnished, with bare floors, modern furniture, and tasteful prints hung on the eggshell-white walls. One side of the split-level living room was conspicuously empty; all that remained was a piano bench made of brown mahogany similar to what Chet had seen piled on the tarp by the police team seven floors below.

He found Claire with a forensic scientist on the other side of the room, the two of them staring at a computer screen on a large desk. The superintendent was adjusting additional yellow CAUTION tape across the broken French doors that led out to the balcony where the remnants of the railing had been reinforced with boards. Chet heard him mumble, "Serious and urgent repair work is in order here."

The detective walked through each of the rooms in the apartment, greeting the team as they photographed the scene and dusted surfaces for fingerprints. The kitchen was tidy. Counters wiped clean. No dirty dishes in the sink. He took an extra minute in front of the cupboards: jars of dry beans, hazelnuts, oat flakes, and barley; boxes of unsalted quinoa crackers; and various containers of wild rice, whole grain pasta, Espelette ground pepper from the Basque Country, and honey, all neatly arranged on shelves. There were no perishables left in the refrigerator. The liquor

cabinet contained only high-ticket items: Lagavulin single-malt scotch and Hendrick's gin. The freezer held two bottles of Stolichnaya Elit vodka, one of which was nearly empty.

In the bedroom, the clothes in the drawers were neatly folded; those in the giant walk-in closet hung as if on display for *Vogue*. On the bedside table Chet noticed a stack of paper. Without touching the pages he read the cover sheet: *Rediscovering the Development of Our Worldviews*. He then slapped on a fresh pair of gloves, turned to the first page of the manuscript, and continued reading to the seventh.

Chet walked into the bathroom after what seemed like a long time. He flipped on the light, removed his gloves, and was dazzled by the cleanest porcelain he'd seen in years. The medicine cabinet revealed no special secrets. The drawers were arranged with care.

Back in the living room he encountered Sebastian Fellows. "Somebody must come in and clean this place on a regular basis. Do you have any information on the person or the service?"

Fellows shook his head. "Mrs. Grumi doesn't have help. Does her own housework."

"No regular visitors?"

Fellows thought a minute. "Well, yes, three people visit quite often."

"Know their names?"

"Nope. I've met them, but I didn't get their names."

From across the room, Claire looked up from the computer and said, "I do. I checked her appointment book. Look here."

Chet walked over to the desk and followed Claire's finger to the line for January 19: "Rob, Henry, Fabian for bridge and dinner."

"Good," Chet said. "What do we do with three first names?"

"I also know their last names, Professor. Check out the address book, here. No, don't touch it. Never mind, I copied down the names, addresses, and phone numbers. Rob Ander, Henry Ducrull, Fabian Head. Ring any bells, Mr. Fellows?"



He nodded. "That sounds right. As I said, Mrs. Grumi introduced me to them."

Claire smiled, but her voice wasn't friendly. "We asked if you knew those names. You said you did not. Were you trying to hide something, Mr. Fellows?"

Chet jumped into the conversation. "Your job is to respond honestly to a police officer in the course of an investigation."

Fellows heaved a huge sigh. He nodded.

Claire stood up and said, "Very well, Mr. Fellows, unless my partner has any more questions for you?" then looked at Chet, raising her eyebrows.

"Yeah," Chet said. "Pretty much done. One question, Mr. Fellows. This upper level of the living room. I assume this is where the piano sat until this morning?"

"That's right."

"And was this platform built specially to accommodate the piano? It looks like a stage of some sort."

"Mrs. Grumi asked for permission to build the platform when she moved in years ago. She had plans drawn up and the owners' association authorized it. Why?"

"It looks as if some recent adjustments have been made to it. No matter, for now. Mr. Fellows, if you don't mind, I need to talk to my partner in private. Please, go ahead, and we'll join you downstairs shortly."

The super seemed glad to leave.

"Thank you," Chet said to the retreating figure while turning his head toward his partner. "So what did you find in Grumi's computer?"

"It looked like a lot of work and a lot of personal files. More than I could explore in the time we had. Our experts have work to do here."

"Do you think it will matter to this case?"

"Who knows? But I'm going to have a look at her backup."

"You found a backup disk?"

"Not a disk. A flash memory storage module." Claire pulled out a Ziploc

bag and, holding it up to Chet, said, "It was in the piano bench."

"You're removing evidence from a crime scene?"

She shook her head. "This is all by the book. Fina photo'd the contents of the bench before and after I removed the thing. I logged it in. All items are tagged—you can see that. How about you? You were in the other rooms for quite a while. What do we got?"

"Well, to start with, that Nikki Grumi is a really interesting woman. It appears she's writing a new book, a nonfiction, surprisingly. It looks like something I'd like to read. For one thing, it might give us some clues. And we need to talk to the three gentlemen. Soon. Today. And find out more about Jim Cambric."

"Noted. What else?"

"Well, it appears to me that the piano wasn't pushed."

"You're saying this was an accident? Another homicide case down the drain."

"It wasn't an accident. But since that piano was on wheels, all it would take would be for the wheels to be lined up and the piano to receive some kind of primal nudge, like a micro earthquake. All I'm saying is it wasn't pushed. Not literally, anyway."

"Explain?"

"The platform was raised on one end. Resting on shims."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah. My guess is that somebody, aware of Grumi's whereabouts, managed to come in and roll the piano sideways off the platform long enough to jack up one end and give it just enough of a slant not to be noticeable to the untrained eye. Whoever did that then brought the piano back and set it in place with the wheels positioned not to roll. Then later, I don't know what. Something got that show on the road."

"Very observant of you, my dear Watson."