



Beethoven's Tenth

A Frank Ryan
Mystery

**BRIAN
HARVEY**

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Summary: In this murder mystery, piano tuner and unlikely sleuth Frank Ryan is forced to solve a mystery in order to save his life. (RL 4.5)

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*Life is a lot like jazz...
it's best when you improvise.*

—George Gershwin

Chops

It's amazing what people lose inside grand pianos. House keys, a corned beef sandwich, a single dirty sock—I think I've seen it all, then somebody goes one better. Once I found a black bra between the last three bass strings of a nine-foot concert grand. Not jammed, not stuffed, but carefully threaded, way down at the end of the instrument. Don't ask me why. The owner of the piano was a retired concert pianist about a hundred years old. When I gave the undergarment a tug, a little piece came away in my fingers. It must have been as old as he was. Maybe it was a keepsake. Maybe it was his. You just never know.

So when Miss Pieczynski called to tell me her piano was making a clicking noise, I made room for her in my schedule. I like old people. They don't waste your time trying to impress you. And I especially liked Miss P.

"Is terrible!" she shouted. I held the phone at arm's length. Miss P.'s early experience of telephones had probably been in one of those eastern European countries, don't ask me which. It seemed she had never adapted to phones that actually work.

"Is not Steinway anymore," she yelled. "Is typewriter!"

When Miss P. opened her apartment door, I could hear some innocent Mozart sonata being bludgeoned to death. She grabbed my wrist and pulled me so close I could count the cracks in the powder on her cheek. Her lipstick was off target. It looked like she'd put it on in her sleep.

“Beginner,” she hissed. “This one I am teaching only for the money.” She tugged me toward what she called her music room while I hopped and stumbled out of my shoes. My toolbox swung and caught me in the knee. “Is okay—he tries hard. And he pays cash.” She rubbed a bony thumb and index finger together.

Miss P.’s music room was also her living room. It might have been her dining room too if her piano hadn’t been so long. The guy attacking it looked more like a meat-packer than a music student. He was hunched over Miss P.’s beautiful old Steinway, pounding on it like he was tenderizing a slab of beef. The sleeves of his leather jacket were rolled back, revealing wrists so hairy you could have lost a Rolex in there. A knockoff Rolex probably. His fingers were as fat as the Bavarian smokies you can buy on the waterfront in the summer.

“Stefan!” Miss P. rapped the top of his shaven head with a battered ruler. She was old school. “Is enough.” He looked up, took me in and cracked his knuckles. The skin around his eyes was bruised-looking, as though he hadn’t slept for a week. I began to wonder what Stefan did for a living. She nudged one creaking leather shoulder. “Let the tuner look at my piano. Before you are killing it.”

I hate being called a tuner. Tuners tune, and I can do that as well as anyone, but tuning is just the warm-up. I’m a piano technician, and the technician is the person who can make your instrument sing the way it’s supposed to. Or make it stop sounding like a typewriter. Whatever it takes.

Miss P.’s student rose. There was a lot of him. An elderly cat wound its way between my ankles and then limped across the carpet into the kitchen. The whole apartment smelled of cat piss and something

else I couldn't identify. It wasn't pleasant. Stefan wandered over to the music cabinet and began thumbing through Miss P.'s scores. Every few pages he'd lick one of those sausage fingers. He looked like a guy checking out the skin magazines at the corner store.

"Where's Coco?" I asked. Coco was one of those little rat dogs—don't ask me what breed—but Miss P. loved him. Usually Coco spent most of my session humping my ankle. Miss P. shrugged and righted a faded, signed publicity shot that Stefan had knocked over with his butt-sized shoulder. A lovely woman, smiling, confident, in a fifties perm. The young Miss P.

"Maybe Coco hides," she said. "From Stefan." She giggled. "Now sit. Play. Fix. I have another student very soon. Good student, not like this one." Stefan was still sifting through music scores as if looking for something specific. What would a guy

like him be looking for in a bookshelf full of Beethoven and Brahms? Miss P. rapped him on the shoulder again, stuck out a hand and watched him deal four tens into it. She made a fist around the money and jerked her head toward the door. When the door closed she said, "Play something nice. Chopin maybe. You play so good, Frankie. You have the chops."

Nobody calls me Frankie—except Miss Pieczynski. For her I make an exception. The funny thing is, if I'd known what kind of people I was about to start associating with, the name Frankie would have fit just fine. But now I just smiled. *Chops*, for a musician, means great technique, and she was right. As a piano student I'd had chops in abundance. Chops matter. You can have all the talent in the world, but without chops you're never going to have a career. I was the other way around, at least with the

classical stuff Miss P. had made her living playing and teaching—lots of chops but not enough talent. That combination only works with great looks, and I flunked in that department too. Then there was my name. Frank Ryan—does that sound like a classical pianist to you? *Frank Ryan Plays Debussy*? It just doesn't work. Franklin might, but that's not what my parents named me.

When I turned to jazz, though, the talent problem disappeared. Feeling and chops are enough. As a jazz pianist, I'm in my element. I'm still not a fashion model, but I have two requirements out of three, and most of the clubs I play are dark enough that I'm just a bent-over blob with fingers. And as a name for a person who tunes pianos by day and plays the jazz bars by night, Frank fits.

"Some Schumann, Frankie? Schubert? Scriabin?"

I don't like being pushed. "Not today."
I sat down. The seat was still warm. It was
unnerving, like sitting on a toilet some
stranger has just left. "Let's go with Sinatra."
I waggled my wrists and tucked into the
opening of "Fly Me to the Moon."

Fly me to the moon, Sinatra sang in my
head. *Let me play among the—*

CLUNK.

"Is the problem I mentioned." Miss P.
was right behind me. I pressed on.

*Let me see what spring is like on Jupiter
and—*

CLONK.

Behind me, Miss P. sighed. I left Sinatra
with his whiskey and his babes and stood up.

"There's something inside your piano,"
I said. "Under the lid. It's doing weird
things to your D string. Stand back." The
lid on a nine-foot Steinway weighs a ton.
You've got to put your shoulder into it
and get the prop stick into its little cup,

because if you drop that lid it'll break your arm. That's one reason I've found so many strange things inside pianos—nobody lifts the lids much.

But I know my way around piano lids. I stiff-armed it up, set the stick and jumped back so fast I nearly knocked Miss P. over. The smell I couldn't identify earlier smacked me in the face. I clapped a hand over my nose. Miss P. pushed past me and peered over her reading glasses.

"Coco," she scolded. "There you are, you naughty boy."