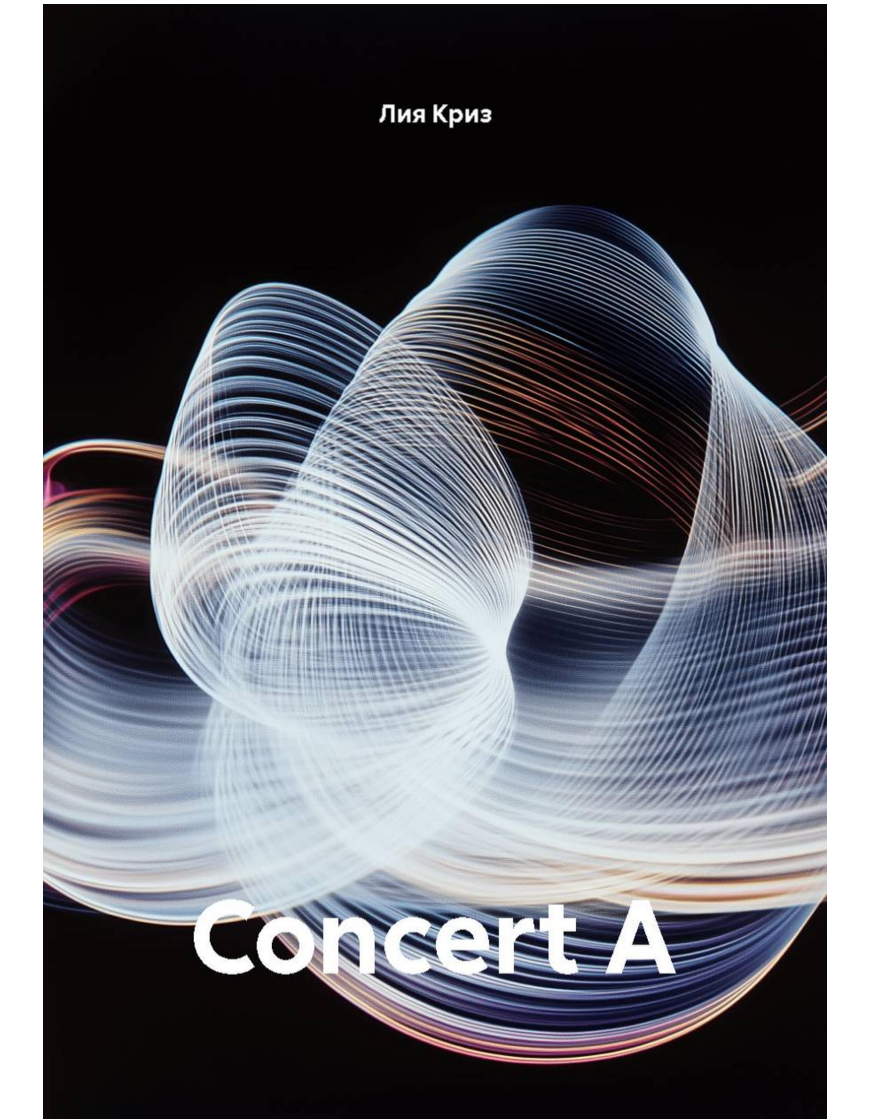


Лия Криз



Concert A

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Аннотация

Varya is a piano tuner. Three months ago her fiancé called her boring and left her for someone else. A strange phone call brings her to Zarechye, a small town on the Volga, to a rare 1912 grand piano and its gruff owner, Ilya, who insists he doesn't like music.

Inside the piano Varya finds a letter from 1963: Tonya, Ill come back by the time the ice breaks. Ilyas grandmother waited for that man on the landing stage for sixty springs in a row. As Varya gives the old instrument its voice back, she and Ilya piece together someone else's love story. And slowly they realise their own could end the same way, unless one of them dares to cross the river.

A warm, tender novel about love that waits, second chances, and why waiting isn't always the answer.

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Лия Криз Concert A

Concert A

A novel in eight chapters

Oct 10, 2026 · @Влад

Chapter 1. The Man Who Didn't Like Music

Varvara Lavrova could hear things other people couldn't. It wasn't a gift so much as an occupational illness. The neighbours' fridge hummed half a tone flat. The tram on the bend squealed an almost perfect E. And for the last three months her own heart had been beating unevenly, losing the rhythm, like an old metronome someone had dropped on the floor.

Varya was twenty-nine. She tuned pianos.

When she said so at parties, people usually asked her to repeat it. Then they asked whether that job still existed. Then how much it paid. Kirill, her ex-fiancé, liked to answer for her: "Not much, but it's very spiritual." Everyone laughed. Varya laughed too, because it was easier.

Now Kirill was gone. There was June, dusty Moscow, a rented flat in Sokol, and a Petrof piano in the corner that Varya hadn't played for three months. She didn't feel like it.

The call came on a Wednesday at half past seven in the morning. An unknown number, with some regional code.

"Lavrova?" asked a man's voice. Low, a little husky, without any "hello". "You tune pianos?"

"I do," Varya answered cautiously. "Who's this?"

"The music school gave me your number. Said you're the best. Or the only one who'd agree to come out."

"Come out where?"

"Zarechye. On the Volga, five hours from Moscow. I've got a piano here. Old one. Needs sorting out so I can sell it. I'll pay well. I'll cover the travel. I'll find you somewhere to stay."

He spoke as if every word cost him money. Varya sat up in bed and looked out of the window. In the courtyard the janitor was hosing down the asphalt, and the water glittered in the sun.

"What kind of piano?"

"Don't know. Black. Big. With legs."

Varya couldn't help smiling.

"All pianos have legs. There should be a name on the lid. Could you look, please?"

Over the line came footsteps, creaking floorboards, a dull thud. Then the voice, from further away:

"Beck-er. B-E-C-K-E-R. And numbers. Nineteen twelve."

Varya stopped smiling.

A Becker from 1912. The St Petersburg factory, before the revolution. Only a handful of those instruments were left in the country. She had seen one at the conservatory and one in a private collection where a friend of a friend had once taken her. Both sounded so beautiful they made you want to cry.

"I'll come," she said. "When suits you?"

"Tomorrow, if you like. I'm Ilya. I'll send the address."

And he hung up. Also without a goodbye.

The journey took not five hours but six and a half. First

a commuter train, then a bus that drove as if it couldn't be bothered. Outside the window stretched fields, copses, villages with crooked fences. Varya watched it all and realised that for the first time in three months she didn't want to cry. Probably because there was no time: the bus shook so hard she had to hold on with both hands.

Zarechye turned out to be a small town on a high riverbank. A white church on a hill, wooden houses with carved window frames, a landing stage with boats bobbing beside it. And the Volga. Enormous, slow, silver under the evening sun. Varya got off the bus, breathed in air that smelled of river and linden, and for a second forgot why she had come.

"Lavrova?"

She turned.

Beside an old Niva stood a man of about thirty-five. Tall, broad-shouldered, in a faded checked shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His hands were covered in small scars and sawdust. Dark hair that hadn't seen a barber in a while, stubble on his chin. And grey eyes, attentive and completely unwelcoming.

"Varvara," she said, holding out her hand. "Call me Varya."

He looked at her hand as if he didn't know what to do with it. Then he shook it after all. His palm was rough and warm.

"Ilya. Get in."

He took her case of tools, weighed it in his hand and raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Heavy."

"Tuning levers, wedges, little hammers. And spare strings."

"I thought you'd turn up with a tuning fork. And that's it."

"There's a tuning fork too," said Varya. "It's in my pocket."

Ilya snorted. It was the first thing that came anywhere near a laugh.

The house stood at the very edge of town, on its own, by the river. Two storeys, wooden, with an attic room and blue shutters. Once it must have been very beautiful. Now the paint was peeling, the porch had sagged, and the garden was so overgrown that the apple trees were drowning in nettles.

"My grandmother's," Ilya said shortly, switching off the engine. "She died in March."

"I'm very sorry."

He didn't answer. He got out, climbed onto the porch and unlocked the door with a key that hung on a cord around his neck.

Inside it smelled of wood, dried herbs and something else. That particular smell you only find in old houses where people lived a long time and loved a long time. Framed photographs hung on the walls. Crocheted doilies lay on the chest of drawers. A cuckoo clock had stopped long ago. Everything was clean, but somehow frozen, as if the house were holding its breath and afraid to let it out.

And in the big room, by the window looking out on the river, stood the piano.

Varya stopped on the threshold.

It was huge, a concert grand, nearly two metres long. The black lacquer had dulled and cracked into fine lines, like an old painting. But the curve of the case was so smooth and perfect that it took Varya's breath away. On the music desk, in worn half-vanished gold, were the words: "J. Becker. St. Petersburg."

She approached slowly, the way you approach a sleeping animal. Ran her palm over the lid. No dust. Someone had been wiping it.

"May I?" she asked, without turning round.

"That's what I called you for."

Varya lifted the keyboard lid. The keys were real ivory, yellowed like old teeth. One of them, in the middle octave, had a small chip. She pressed A.

The sound came out muffled, rattling, crooked. Like the voice of someone who had been silent so long they'd forgotten how to speak. Varya winced and pressed a chord. Then another. Somewhere inside something buzzed, one hammer was clearly sticking, and the bass strings droned out of step with each other.

But beneath all that out-of-tuneness, beneath the dust and the years of silence, she heard it. Its real voice. Deep, warm, with that velvety depth no modern factory can make.

"It hasn't been tuned for a long time," she said quietly.

"Fifteen years, maybe. Gran didn't play in her last years. Her hands hurt."

"And you? Do you play?"

"No."

"Not at all?"

"Not at all," said Ilya. He stood by the door, leaning against the frame, arms crossed. "I don't like music, actually."

Varya turned and looked at him as if he had said he didn't like breathing.

"How can anyone not like music?"

"Easily." He shrugged. "Noisy. Useless. How much time do you need?"

Varya turned back to the piano. She opened the top lid and looked inside. The strings had darkened; some were rusty. The felt on the hammers was worn thin. The soundboard, thank God, hadn't warped, but the pinblock, the wooden plank that holds the tuning pins, might let her down.

"A week," she said. "Maybe two. Just tuning it is a day. But if you want to sell it for what it's really worth, it has to be put in order. Otherwise you'll sell treasure for the price of firewood."

Ilya was silent for a moment.

"Two weeks," he repeated. "Fine. You'll stay with Zinaida Petrovna, three houses down. She lets rooms. I've arranged it. You can have breakfast there too. Work whenever you like, I'll give you a key."

"And where will you be?"

"In my workshop. It's not far."

He had already turned to leave but stopped in the doorway.

"Varvara."

"Varya."

"Varya." He said it as if testing how the word tasted. "Do you really think it's worth that much?"

She stroked the piano lid the way you stroke a child's head.

"I think it's worth far more than anyone will pay for it. But that's another question."

Ilya didn't answer. He just gave her a long, unreadable look and left. The front door banged, the Niva's engine roared, and everything went quiet.

Varya was alone.

She ought to go to Zinaida Petrovna's, unpack, eat. But instead she pulled up the old piano stool, sat down and for a long time simply looked at the piano. Outside the sun was setting, and the Volga turned from silver to pink, and then to gold.

At last she took the tuning fork from her pocket, struck it on her knee and held it to her ear. A clear, ringing A above middle C. Four hundred and forty vibrations a second. The note every orchestra in the world begins with. The note everything else is built on.

She pressed the same key on the piano. Compared. The piano was nearly a semitone flat.

"It's all right," Varya whispered. "It's all right, my dear. We'll make you better."

She decided to check the action first. She removed the music desk and carefully took out the key slip. She shone her phone's torch inside, to where the hammers and dampers hid beneath the

strings.

And she saw an envelope.

It had been pushed deep in, between the frame and the case, into a narrow gap you could never reach by accident. Someone had hidden it on purpose. Yellowed, frayed at the edges, with no stamp and no address.

Varya looked at it for a long time. Then carefully, with two fingers, she drew it out.

The envelope wasn't sealed. Inside was a single sheet folded in four. Squared paper, torn from a school exercise book. And a few lines in quick, flying, clearly masculine handwriting. The ink had faded to a pale violet.

"Tonya. I know you're angry. I know you won't forgive me straight away. But I'll come back by the time the ice breaks, do you hear? When the ice starts moving, wait for me on the landing stage. I'll come. Whatever happens, I'll come. Just wait for me. Yours, M."

Below was a date: "12 November 1963."

Varya read the letter three times. Outside it had grown completely dark. Somewhere on the river a steamer gave a long, drawn-out hoot.

Tonya. Antonina. Ilya's grandmother?

And who was M.?

And had he come back when the ice broke?

Varya folded the sheet, slid it back into the envelope and laid it on the piano lid. Then she thought again and put it in her bag.

Tomorrow she would give it to Ilya. It was his grandmother, his family, his story.

But falling asleep that night in the little room at Zinaida Petrovna's, to the chirring of crickets and the distant splash of the river, Varya kept thinking about a stranger who had promised sixty years ago to come back. And about the woman who had hidden his letter in the very heart of the piano, where no one would ever find it.

No one except whoever came one day to tune it.

Chapter 2. A Town Where Everyone Knows Everything

Zinaida Petrovna was a woman of boundless proportions in every sense. Boundless figure, boundless voice and boundless curiosity. She was past seventy, wore flowery dressing gowns, painted her lips bright raspberry, and knew more about every resident of Zarechye than they knew about themselves.

"Eat up, eat up, dearie," she said, sliding a third pancake onto Varya's plate. "So skinny. Don't they feed you in Moscow? Have some sour cream. It's homemade, from the neighbour's cow, Zorka."

Varya sat on a veranda wrapped in wild vines and felt as if she had stepped back into childhood. She was embarrassed, warm and very well fed all at once. Sunlight broke through the leaves and painted trembling patches on the tablecloth.

"So you've come to Ilyusha," said Zinaida Petrovna, sitting down opposite with a cup of tea. It wasn't a question. It was the start of an interrogation. "To fix Tonechka's piano."

"To tune it. Did you know his grandmother?"

Zinaida Petrovna threw up her hands so hard her tea nearly spilled.

"Did I know Tonya! Dearie, the whole town knew her. Antonina Sergeyevna Belova. She taught at the music school for forty years. Half the town studied with her. I did too, only I've

got no ear at all, like a stool. But she worked with me anyway. Patient, she was. Like a saint."

"What was she like?"

Zinaida Petrovna thought. Her face softened, and for a second she looked like the little girl who had once sat at the piano missing every key.

"Beautiful. Even when she was old, beautiful. Strict, but not unkind. Always walked straight-straight, as if she had a ruler instead of a spine. And her eyes were so... sad. She'd be smiling, but her eyes were still sad. When I was little I thought all music teachers had eyes like that."

"And her husband?"

"Pyotr Ivanovich? A good man. Quiet, hard-working. Built boats, like Ilyusha does now. It runs in the family. He loved her very much. Practically carried her around in his arms. Died twenty years ago, his heart."

Varya was silent for a moment, poking at her pancake with a fork.

"Zinaida Petrovna, do you happen to know... was there someone else in Antonina Sergeyevna's life? Before her husband. Someone whose name began with M?"

Zinaida Petrovna narrowed her eyes. Small and sharp as a sparrow's, they fixed on Varya.

"Why do you want to know?"

"No reason," said Varya, and felt herself blushing. "Just curious."

"Curious, she says." The landlady sipped her tea and gazed at the river for a long time. "There was something. Long ago. I was just a girl, I don't really remember. My mother said Tonya had a fiancé before Pyotr. Someone from outside. A geologist or a scientist, something like that. He went away and never came back. And a year later she married Pyotr. That's the whole story."

"Went away and never came back," Varya repeated quietly.

"That's how it goes, dearie," sighed Zinaida Petrovna. "Men are like that. They promise and promise... Eat your pancake, it's getting cold."

Varya found Ilya's workshop by its smell. Fresh shavings, resin, linseed oil. A long wooden shed right on the shore, with wide doors flung open. A boat's prow peeked out through them, pale, smooth, curved like a bird's wing.

Inside it was bright and cool. The smell of wood was so strong it made her head spin. Tools hung along the walls, each in its own place. Planes, chisels, saws, mysterious clamps. And in the middle, on wooden trestles, lay a boat. Still unfinished: its ribs stuck up like the bones of a whale.

Ilya stood with his back to her, planing a board. Long, precise strokes. Shavings curled into rings and dropped at his feet.

Varya stopped at the doors and simply watched for a few seconds. There was something mesmerising about it. A rhythm. The rasp of the plane, a breath, the rasp, a breath. Almost music, even though he didn't like music.

"Are you going to stand there long?" Ilya asked without turning round.

Varya jumped.

"How did you know?"

"Shadow." He nodded at the floor, where her long morning shadow lay. He put down the plane and finally turned. "Something wrong with the piano?"

"No. I mean yes. I mean..." Varya took the envelope out of her bag. "I found this inside. Yesterday. It was hidden between the frame and the case. I think it was your grandmother's."

Ilya wiped his hands on a rag and took the envelope. He drew out the sheet and unfolded it. Varya watched him read. At first indifferently. Then he frowned. Then his face became perfectly still, like water on a windless day.

He finished reading. Folded the sheet. Pushed it back into the envelope.

"My grandfather was Pyotr," he said evenly. "Not M."

"I know. Zinaida Petrovna told me your grandmother had someone before him. Someone from outside. Who went away and..."

"Zinaida Petrovna," Ilya interrupted, "will tell you anything. She's probably told you about me already."

"No," Varya said honestly. "She hasn't got round to you yet."

"She will." He held the envelope out to her. "Keep it. Or throw it away."

Varya didn't take it.

"But it's your grandmother's letter. It's her life."

"It's her past." Ilya put the envelope on the workbench next to the plane. "She hid it. So she didn't want anyone to see. Let it stay that way."

"But she didn't throw it away," Varya said softly. "She kept it for sixty years."

Ilya didn't answer. He picked up the plane again and turned back to the board. The conversation was over.

Varya stood a little longer, looking at his back. Broad, tense. Then she turned and left.

The envelope stayed on the workbench.

She worked all day.

First she removed the entire action, gently, like a surgeon. Hammers, levers, dampers. She laid everything out on the old grandmother's table, covered with newspapers. Cleaned every part. Checked every little spring. Half the felt needed replacing, and she made a list of what would have to be ordered from Moscow.

Then she turned to the strings. She tightened them bit by bit, a little at a time, so they wouldn't snap after all those years. The piano creaked, groaned, complained. Like an old man being woken from a long sleep.

"I know, I know," Varya muttered, turning the lever. "It's unpleasant. Bear with me. It'll get easier soon."

She always talked to instruments. It used to annoy Kirill.

"You're like a cat lady," he'd say. But Varya felt that instruments could hear. Better than some people, at any rate.

By evening her back ached so badly she could hardly straighten up. Her hands were black with old dust and grease. But the bass was nearly in tune now, and somewhere deep inside the piano that same voice she had heard yesterday was beginning to wake.

She sat down on the stool, wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and, unable to resist, played a few bars. Nothing special. The opening of a Chopin nocturne she had played since childhood. E-flat major, Opus 9, Number 2. The melody drifted through the empty house, still uncertain, a little sour in the upper register, but already alive.

She finished the phrase and froze.

Ilya was standing in the doorway.

She didn't know how long he had been there. He wasn't moving. In his hand was the envelope.

"Don't stop," he said hoarsely.

"It's not properly tuned yet. The top is off..."

"I don't care. I can't hear the difference."

Varya hesitated. Then she laid her hands on the keys again and started from the beginning.

She played without looking at him. She looked at her fingers, at the yellowed keys, at the window, where the Volga was fading. The nocturne slowly unfolded, like a flower, like a conversation between two people who haven't seen each other for a long time

and don't know where to begin.

When the last chord melted into silence, Ilya was still standing in the doorway.

"She played that," he said. "Gran. When I was little. Every evening. I'd fall asleep to it upstairs." He paused. "I'd forgotten. Completely forgotten. And just now I heard it and..."

He didn't finish. He turned to the window.

Varya said nothing. She knew that sometimes the right thing is to say nothing at all.

"I reread the letter," Ilya said at last, without turning round. "It mentions the ice breaking."

"Yes."

"Every spring Gran went down to the landing stage. When the ice was moving. Every spring, for as long as I can remember. She'd get dressed, take her stick and go. She'd stand there an hour, two. Sometimes Grandad went with her. More often alone. I thought she just liked watching the ice. It's beautiful, after all." He gave a joyless smile. "I even took photos of her there. I thought it was a tradition."

He turned round. In the dusk his face looked completely different. Younger. More lost.

"Sixty years," he said. "She went to that damned landing stage for sixty years."

Varya got up from the stool. She went over to him and stopped beside him at the window. Below, the river was darkening, and a small light was slowly moving across it, a boat or a buoy.

"Maybe she was just remembering," said Varya. "Not waiting, remembering. They're not the same thing."

"How would you know?"

Varya shrugged.

"I don't. That's just what I think."

They stood in silence. Somewhere in the garden a nightingale began to sing, hesitantly, as if testing its voice, like the piano that morning.

"Varya," said Ilya. It was the first time he had said her name on his own, without being prompted. "If you find anything else in there... in the piano. Tell me. All right?"

"All right."

He nodded and handed her the envelope.

"Keep it for now. I don't know what to do with it."

Varya took the letter. Their fingers touched for a second, and she felt how warm his hands were. Ilya immediately pulled his away and pushed them into his pockets.

"Good night," he said, and left.

Varya watched him go for a long time. Then she looked at the piano, dark and silent in the dusk.

"Well," she whispered. "What else are you hiding?"

The piano didn't answer, of course. But it seemed to Varya that one of the bass strings hummed softly all on its own. As if it had sighed.

Chapter 3. Letters No One Sent

Varya made her second discovery three days later.

By then she knew the house by heart. She knew which stair creaked, which window frame stuck, and at what hour the sun reached the piano and lay across the keys in a warm stripe. She knew that Zinaida Petrovna baked pies on Thursdays and that the neighbours' cat, Baron, turned up at the porch at noon sharp, demanding milk.

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