

The Break-Up

Had Holly been operating Neumann's security cameras near Stocking Stuffers', instead of chatting with the smooth operator at her work station, she would have overheard Nik and Lena's conversation, midway through their bowls of chili:

"Look, I can be supportive—and have been. I'm not asking for much. But it seems like when push comes to shove, your work comes before us. If we're going to make it, we've both got to invest, not just one of us," said Nik, in response to Lena's absence the night before.

"I've been doing what I can, but I have next to nothing left after all the demands of running a non-profit and spear-heading the grant project."

"I understand this is a busy season, and I can hang in there better than most, but this goes beyond the busyness. There's a distance between us that feels bigger than all that."

"Nik, you're a great guy. And I wanted this to work out. But with Music Keys taking off, my full attention needs to be there. It's like when I was in dance and taking vocal lessons. I couldn't give my full attention to both. I was divided no matter how hard I tried to give my best."

"You used past tense."

"What do you mean?" Blinked Lena.

"You said you *wanted* this to work out. You didn't say you *want* this to work out."

"I did?"

"Lena, I care about you a lot. So much so that I planned a spontaneous, elaborate proposal to try and win you over. But I accidentally proposed to Holly instead."

"You what?"

"It was a big mix-up."

“You were going to propose?”

“Well I did, but you didn’t show up.”

“Nik. I’m sorry.”

“Would you have said, ‘yes’?”

“I’m flattered for sure.”

“You’re avoiding the question. Would you have said, ‘yes’?”

“Nik,” Lena placed her hands on his.

He scanned her almond-shaped eyes for clues.

“I’m not sure,” she answered reluctantly.

“Not sure?” he removed his hand from under hers. “I moved across the country to be closer to you. Well, you and Aunt Claire. What more could I do to show you I care?”

“Nik, I’m not sure a proposal will fix this.” She returned her hands to her lap, lowering her head.

“What?”

“That’s what you were trying to do, right? Propose, in an effort to try and fix what’s not working?” She looked back up at Nik, searching for confirmation to her claim.

“I can tell you one thing, you are definitely working....*a lot!*”

“There it is.”

“Lena, I’m not the jealous type, but the way work comes first for you, almost every time, is concerning. I’ve hung in there. I’ve gotten hobbies—like volunteering at the shelter and attending concerts, *alone*—to try and give you space as you work, and work some more. I’ve helped out at Music Keys, willingly. I believe in what you’re doing. You know that. But I think

this is more than just a busy season. I think you need to decide if you want a relationship or a career.”

“That’s not fair,” said Lena.

“You’re right. It’s not fair to be in a relationship when you’re not all in. When you’re only halfway there. So, I’m asking, do you want this or not?”

“This is how it’s going to be, huh?”

“Look, I’m not saying you have to quit Music Keys, not in the slightest. I’m one of your biggest fans, truly. But you’ve gotta know when to stop for the night. Not everyone keeps your pace. If you never slow down, how do you expect others to keep running beside you?”

“Where is this coming from? Was it my work call at the Inn, on our date?”

“Lena, that was just one time of many. You’ve made it clear that work comes before us. You’re so far in, I feel like you can’t see it. Can’t see beyond your to-do list and next big accomplishment.”

“That hurts,” her dark eyes filled with crystal tears, as she gracefully wiped them away.

“I’m sorry,” Nik reached over the table to offer Lena his hand. “The thing is, I’m not threatened to have a girlfriend who is driven and successful. But I don’t want to be in a relationship where I’m pushed to the side most of the time, and only included when it’s convenient.” His hand remained opened, but empty.

“Please, stop,” said Lena.

“I guess I’ve been stuffing this for weeks. I’m sorry it’s coming on so strong.”

“I haven’t wanted to admit it. But you may be right.”

“About what?”

“If I had to choose today, I’d choose my goals over a guy. Wow, that’s hard to admit. But for now anyway, that’s how I feel.”

Nik’s open hand slunk back to his side. He clenched it under the table, not in anger, but in an effort to release his hurt by squeezing his fist.

“Would you feel that way if you were dating another guy? Or is it just me who doesn’t measure up?” Pressed Nik.

“I think I’d feel this way regardless. But I didn’t realize it until now because I’ve been so busy...”

“Yeah. This stinks.”

“I’m sorry,” offered Lena.

“Me too. You’re a great person, Lena Albrecht. Really. I care for you a lot.”

“I know that’s true. But don’t you think it’s interesting that you keep using that word? Don’t you think a guy who proposes to his girlfriend would use the word love instead of care?”

If Holly could have zoomed in on Nik’s face, through the security camera’s lens, she would have been a stalker, but she also would have witnessed his surprise realization, that what he thought was love for Lena, was more care and admiration than it was commitment and affection.