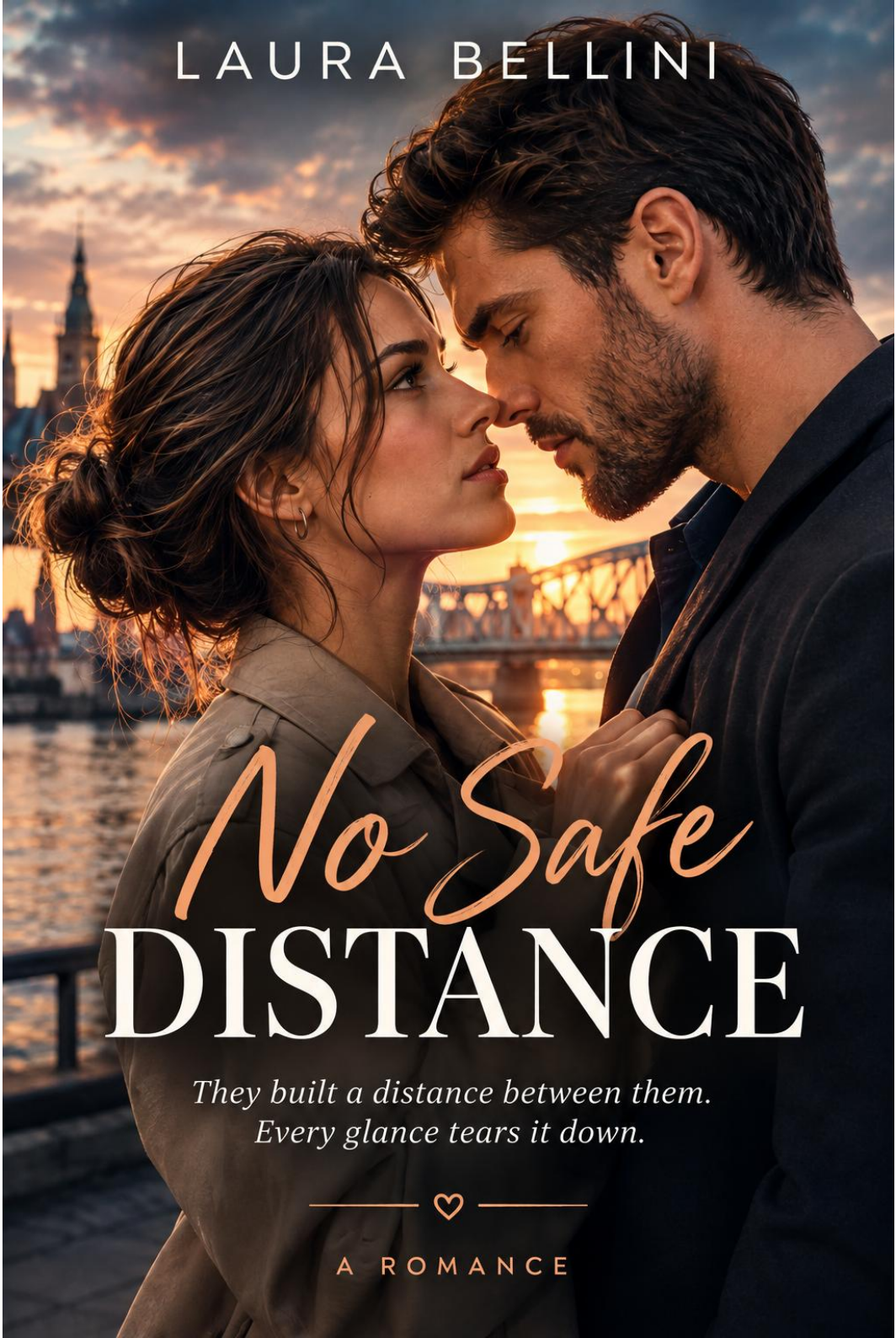

LAURA BELLINI
No Safe
DISTANCE
They built a distance between them.
Every glance tears it down.
A ROMANCE

No Safe Distance

They built a distance between them. Every glance tears it down

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

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ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



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INTRO

The first thing I heard that evening wasn't the roar of machinery or the sound of the Oder flowing beneath the bridge. It was a quiet, unpleasant click from somewhere under my feet as I stepped onto the third section of the pedestrian bridge under renovation.

I stopped immediately.

Beyond the construction barriers, the river moved lazily, reflecting the copper light of the setting sun. Szczecin was slowly settling into evening. On the opposite bank, someone was closing the outdoor seating area of a restaurant, a tram bell rang around a bend, and the wind carried the smell of damp steel and sun-warmed asphalt. Everything looked perfectly ordinary. Yet I stood motionless above the gap between two deck plates, feeling my carefully laid plans begin to unravel.

I crouched and ran a finger along the edge of the steel cover plate. There shouldn't have been any movement there. The component was temporary, but its expected displacement certainly didn't include an audible knock under the weight of one person. I took out my phone, snapped two photographs, then opened the drawing I had considered almost finished that very morning.

I had spent six months working on the renovation design for this crossing. I knew its dimensions, repair history, and peculiarities better than the layout of my own apartment. I knew where moisture collected, which connections needed replacing, and why the original reinforcement proposal was too expensive. My design would preserve the bridge's

distinctive outline, minimise the closure period, and avoid dismantling entire spans.

In two days, I was due to present it to the client's review committee.

And in three weeks, if everything went according to plan, I would sign a contract that could finally allow my small engineering practice to stop living from one commission to the next.

"I wouldn't go any farther."

A man's voice came from behind me.

I turned too quickly. A man stood at the entrance to the cordoned-off section, wearing a dark jacket with a hard hat tucked beneath one arm. I didn't recognise him, although he moved with the confidence of someone who had no need to ask permission. He looked about thirty-five, with short dark hair and a face whose tiredness did nothing to diminish its stern attractiveness. He looked first at my shoes, then at the cover plate beside the expansion joint, and only then at me.

"That depends on where I'm going," I replied.

"If you're planning to go beyond the third section, I'd strongly advise against it."

"And if the third section is exactly what I'm interested in?"

"Then we have a problem in common."

He didn't smile. Nor did he try to take my phone or escort me away from the place where he clearly didn't want me standing. He simply set his hard hat on a nearby crate and studied the steel plate with such concentration that he seemed to be having a conversation with the structure rather than with me.

"Karolina Narew," I introduced myself. "I'm responsible for the renovation design."

He raised his eyes.

"Dominik Kania. Structural inspector."

I knew the name.

Two weeks earlier, I'd read his assessment of my preliminary documentation. Seventeen pages of objections, four additional measurement requirements, and one sentence I remembered almost word for word: The assumed model of support behaviour has not been adequately justified.

He was the reason I'd spent my recent nights working through calculations instead of sleeping in my own bed.

"So you're the one," I said.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"That depends on the accusation."

"Seventeen pages of comments on a design you apparently believe is impossible without completely rebuilding the bridge."

"I never wrote that it was impossible."

"You implied it rather effectively."

"I wrote that I needed evidence before putting my signature to the proposed solution."

There was no condescension in his voice. That irritated me more than anything. It was easier to fight someone who challenged other people's work merely to demonstrate his own authority. Dominik, however, looked like someone who genuinely believed caution mattered more than ambition.

I straightened and showed him the photograph of the gap.

"This is new. Yesterday, there was no perceptible movement."

He extended a hand but didn't take my phone. Instead, he leaned closer to study the screen. I caught the faint scent of his cologne, something woody and fresh, entirely out of place on a dusty construction site. He stood close enough for me to notice a small scar near his eyebrow, yet far enough away that I could easily have stepped aside.

"When was the last measurement taken?" he asked.

"Yesterday at four forty in the afternoon."

"Structure temperature?"

"Twenty-one degrees Celsius."

"And today?"

"I haven't got a current reading."

He accepted that without comment. He took a small measuring device from his jacket pocket, switched it on, and aimed it at the metal surface. For a moment, we both watched the display.

"Thirty-two point five," he said.

"Thermal expansion doesn't explain everything."

"I know."

Those two short words robbed me of the retort I'd been preparing.

He crouched beside the gap, illuminated the connection with a flashlight, and asked me to move back onto a stable section of the deck. I did, although I wanted to protest. For several minutes, we worked in silence. I checked the documentation on my phone while he examined the steel

fixing and compared its position with the previously marked reference points.

Finally, he stood and removed his gloves.

"We need to suspend loading on this section until we can take further measurements."

"I know. I'll notify the site manager."

"I already did, before you arrived."

I looked at him sharply.

"When?"

"Twenty minutes ago."

"And you're only telling me now?"

"I wanted to hear what you'd observed first."

For a moment, I stared at him without speaking. I disliked methods like that. I disliked being tested, hidden examinations, and situations in which someone gained an advantage over me simply because they'd received information fifteen minutes earlier. At my previous job, I'd been told often enough that I was talented but still too young to manage serious projects independently. I'd established my own practice precisely so I wouldn't have to keep convincing people that a thirty-year-old woman could be responsible for a bridge.

"Next time, tell me immediately," I said. "I don't need an examiner. I need a partner who'll help me solve the problem."

Dominik studied me carefully.

"You're right."

I'd expected an argument. Instead, he took out his phone and showed me the notification he'd sent, complete with photographs.

"I'm sorry. I should have started with that."

I didn't know what to do with such a straightforward apology. I'd prepared several more arguments, but suddenly none of them seemed necessary.

The wind lifted a loose strand of hair beside my face. I tied it back again, and Dominik turned towards the river, granting me that small moment of privacy. When I looked at him once more, I noticed his fingers tightening around his phone as he studied an open spreadsheet. He paused on one row, scrolled sideways, then immediately darkened the screen.

"Something else?" I asked.

"I need to compare the earlier data with today's measurements."

"Which data?"

"From the inspection during the previous stage."

He hadn't answered as quickly as before. I registered the hesitation, though I had no reason yet to suspect he was hiding anything.

The first lights along the waterfront flickered on in the distance. Copper reflections moved across the damp steel, and less than a metre of empty space separated us. Dominik glanced at the rolled-up drawing protruding from the tube slung over my shoulder.

"Have you prepared a revised proposal?" he asked.

"I have a solution I intend to defend."

"Even if the measurements show it needs changing?"

"Especially then. Defending my work isn't the same as defending my own infallibility."

For the first time, he genuinely smiled. It was brief and unexpectedly warm, transforming his entire face. Which was precisely why I looked away a fraction too late.

"In that case," he said, "I'd like to see your solution."

"Professionally?"

"To begin with."

I didn't answer immediately. I'd heard that small addition perfectly clearly, delivered calmly, without any attempt to force a reaction. I could have ignored it, treated it as a joke, or told him I wasn't interested in conversations beyond the documentation.

Instead, I pulled the drawing from its tube.

"Tomorrow at eight," I said. "In the site office. Bring all the data, not just the convenient figures."

"I'll be there."

I started towards the exit, but after a few steps I stopped and looked back over my shoulder. Dominik was still standing by the railing. The streetlamp cut across his face, leaving one half in shadow.

"Mr Kania?"

"Yes?"

"Do you really think my design is wrong?"

He was silent for a moment.

"I think there are things we don't know yet."

It wasn't the answer I'd expected.

As I walked off the bridge, I thought about tomorrow's meeting, my practice, and the strangely personal undertone of two words: To begin with. Over the past few years, I'd learned to maintain a safe distance from people who could complicate my professional life. Dominik Kania, with his composure, stubbornness, and that searching gaze that made it difficult to conceal even a moment's uncertainty, seemed exactly that kind of man.

And yet, when I reached my car, I didn't immediately take out my keys.

I watched his silhouette above the river for another moment and wondered why, more than tomorrow's confrontation, I feared the possibility that I might actually begin to look forward to it.

Chapter 1 - A Condition of Trust

At eight o'clock that morning, the site office smelled of freshly brewed coffee, dust, and damp paper. I opened my laptop, spread the drawings across the largest table, and checked the order of my presentation one last time. I had forty-eight hours until the client's review committee meeting and far too much to lose to let Dominik Kania turn our discussion into a demonstration of his own infallibility.

A fine drizzle was falling outside. Through the window of the site cabin, I could see part of the closed footbridge, the steel scaffolding, and workers preparing their equipment for the morning measurements. Yesterday's safety report had brought work on one section to a halt, but it hadn't necessarily invalidated my design. At least, that was what I'd been telling myself since six that morning.

The door opened at exactly eight.

Dominik walked in without hurrying, carrying a black document folder and two paper cups. He was wearing a navy-blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Without his jacket and hard hat, he looked less like a man accustomed to giving orders on construction sites and more like someone with whom I might enjoy a long dinner.

The thought arrived entirely uninvited.

"Good morning," he said.

"Punctuality is a promising start."

He placed one of the cups beside my laptop.

"Black. No sugar."

I eyed him suspiciously.

"How did you know?"

"I didn't. I bought two identical coffees."

"And if I take mine with milk?"

"Then I've made my first mistake before the meeting has even begun."

I smiled despite myself.

"Let's hope it's your last."

He sat opposite me, but before opening his folder, he moved his coffee away from the drawings. It was a small gesture, one I shouldn't have noticed. Yet I did. I liked people who understood that someone else's work deserved care even when they intended to criticise it.

"Let's start with yesterday's displacement," I said, opening my presentation. "I've updated the model to account for the temperature difference and the preliminary readings. The displacement itself is close to the limit of the predicted range. The problem is how the cover plate is behaving."

"I agree with the second statement."

"And the first?"

"I'd prefer to wait for the complete measurements."

I changed slides.

"We don't have the luxury of waiting for everything."

"We have a duty to know enough."

I looked at him over my laptop screen.

"Is every conversation with you going to follow the same pattern?"

"Meaning?"

"I present a solution, and you move the boundary of what you consider sufficient."

Dominik was silent for a moment. Then he took a printed copy of my design from his folder. Coloured tabs protruded from its pages. This wasn't a document someone had skimmed in search of mistakes. Someone had genuinely read it, including the footnotes, material schedules, and explanations of the assumptions underlying my simplifications.

"Show me why you decided to retain the existing supports," he said.

I drew a breath.

That was the right question.

For the next twenty minutes, I explained the assumptions that had formed the foundation of my project for six months. I showed him where reinforcement was planned, the sequence in which components would be replaced, and the restrictions imposed by the crossing's location. Dominik didn't interrupt simply for the sake of interrupting. His questions were brief, precise, and occasionally uncomfortable. When he identified an inconsistency between two loading scenarios, I traced it to the assumptions used for the installation stage.

"That can be corrected," I said.

"It can."

"So?"

"So we still don't know whether the assumed distribution of forces reflects how the structure actually behaves."

I planted my hands on the table.

"Mr Kania, if we dismantled every structure simply because a calculation model couldn't account for every aspect of reality, half the bridges in Poland would cease to exist."

"I'm not proposing demolition."

"Your assessment gives a different impression."

"My assessment concerns safety. Not your ambition."

The remark hurt more than it should have.

I straightened slowly.

"Choose your words carefully."

Dominik set down his pen.

"You're right. That was unnecessarily personal."

"Because it was personal."

"That wasn't my intention."

I stood and went to the window. Rain blurred the opposite bank of the river. I knew I was reacting too sharply, but I couldn't immediately regain my composure. Over the years, I'd heard enough comments suggesting that my determination was ambition, and ambition was somehow suspect. A man who defended his position without hesitation was considered decisive. A woman doing exactly the same thing was often called difficult.

"This isn't just about this project," I said eventually.

I hadn't intended to admit that.

"I gathered as much."

I turned my head.

"Please don't tell me you understand me."

"I wasn't going to. I only know that someone who prepared documentation this thoroughly doesn't regard the job as just another commission."

My eyes returned to the drawings.

"This is the first project of this scale being managed entirely by my practice. If the client rejects it, I can't simply move the team onto another contract. I don't have twenty designers or the financial resources of a large engineering firm."

"How many people do you employ?"

"Two. I was planning to take on a third after the contract was signed."

Dominik nodded.

"I understand why the deadline matters to you."

"But that won't change your decision."

"No. It might change how we approach solving the problem, though."

That sounded more reasonable than anything he'd said earlier. I sat down again, and he turned one of the drawings towards me.

"I suggest another series of measurements. Not just on the section that attracted our attention yesterday. I want to compare displacements at three points and verify the actual support conditions."

I examined the locations he'd marked.

"That's at least four days."

"On a standard schedule."

"We don't have four days."

"We can work in parallel. You prepare a revised design option, while I organise the measurements and verify the input data."

I looked up.

"Together?"

"Yes."

"Yesterday, you still had seventeen pages of objections."

"I still have them."

"And now you're proposing that we cooperate?"

"I'd rather have a good project with corrections than a brilliantly argued dispute that ends in failure."

I couldn't fault the logic. I could, however, refuse to accept conditions he might try to impose.

"The design documentation remains under my control," I said. "No alterations without my approval."

"Agreed."

"No discussions with the client about a new option behind my back."

"Agreed, unless a safety issue requires immediate reporting."

"In that case, you notify me at the same time."

"Yes."

I reached for my pen.

"And I need all the earlier measurement data. Not selected extracts."

Something changed in his expression. Only slightly, almost imperceptibly. He studied the documents lying in front of him for a moment before replying.

"I'll make the materials in the inspection records available."

"All of them?"

"Everything I have formal access to."

As I wrote down our agreement, I noticed the difference between my question and his answer. I didn't comment on it.

Not yet.

At eleven, the site manager, Marek Sowiński, appeared at the cabin door. He had the face of a man permanently exhausted by his battles with deadlines.

"I've had a message from the client," he announced. "They want to know whether they can have a recommendation tomorrow."

"They'll receive information about the additional measurements we need," Dominik replied.

Marek looked at me.

"And the design?"

"I'll prepare a revised option," I said. "But I'm not putting my signature to a solution we haven't verified."

Marek sighed.

"You're both stubborn."

"At least we agree on that," I replied.

After he left, Dominik leaned back in his chair.

"I believe that's the first thing you've said in my favour."

"Don't get used to it."

"I'll try not to."

He smiled faintly, and I suddenly realised how many of his habits I'd noticed over the past three hours. He turned his

pen between his fingers when he was listening. He tilted his head slightly to the left when checking calculations. He never raised his voice, even when refusing something firmly. And he maintained eye contact with an attentiveness that, under different circumstances, might have been dangerously pleasant.

That last discovery annoyed me most of all.

"Any other comments?" I asked.

"On the design?"

"On anything concerning this meeting."

"Yes. You haven't eaten breakfast."

I blinked.

"Excuse me?"

He pointed to the untouched sandwich sticking out of my bag.

"It's been there since I arrived. It's almost noon."

"Do you conduct nutritional inspections as well?"

"Only when the lead designer starts answering questions as though every one of them were an attempt to overthrow her independence."

I tried to keep a straight face.

I failed.

The laugh escaped before I could stop it, and Dominik responded with what was now a genuine smile. For a brief moment, the atmosphere in the cabin became almost relaxed.

"You're insufferable," I told him.

"So I've heard."

"Frequently, I imagine."

"Certain opinions recur with remarkable regularity."

I took out my sandwich and unwrapped it.

"Fine. Five-minute break. Then back to the calculations."

"Yes, ma'am."

He said it with exaggerated solemnity.

For the next few minutes, we sat opposite each other, drinking coffee that had long since gone cold. The conversation shifted to Szczecin, its changing waterfront, and the fact that we both liked places where we could watch the water without crowds of tourists. I learned that Dominik had lived in the city for eleven years, although he'd studied in Gdańsk. I told him about my practice near the city centre and how I still hadn't grown accustomed to the silence after the last employee left for the day.

"Do you like being alone?" he asked.

"I like deciding when I'm not."

He studied me for a moment.

"That's an important distinction."

I didn't know why that particular response stayed with me longer than our entire earlier argument.

In the afternoon, we returned to the bridge site. The section remained closed, and the survey team was preparing its equipment. Dominik spoke to the technicians while I compared the locations of the monitoring points with the drawings. When one worker suggested moving a sensor to a more convenient position, I explained why doing so would change the measured value. Dominik didn't interrupt once.

Only when we were alone beside the barrier did he speak.

"You explained that well."

"That sounded almost like a compliment."

"It was."

"Careful. I might start liking you."

He looked at me with amusement.

"Would that be so terrible?"

I could have answered with a joke. I could have reminded him of our professional differences. Instead, I looked at his face for a moment, noticing the faint lines beside his eyes and the pale scar crossing his eyebrow.

"It would be inconvenient," I admitted.

He didn't look away.

"I understand."

In the distance, a reversing lorry sounded its warning signal. I stepped back, recovering our usual distance.

"We start at seven thirty tomorrow," I said.

"I'll be here."

"And please don't bring coffee as a negotiating tactic."

"What if I bring it with no conditions attached?"

I adjusted the strap of my bag on my shoulder.

"Then I might accept it."

Walking back to my car, I had a new schedule, a partially revised design, and a man with whom I would probably be facing weeks of difficult cooperation.

What I didn't have was any certainty about which complicated my plans more: his professional stubbornness or the fact that I was beginning to look forward to our next conversation.

Chapter 2 - Boundaries on Paper

The following morning, Dominik was waiting outside the site cabin with a folder tucked beneath one arm and a coffee in his hand. When he saw me, he raised the cup in a silent question. I shook my head and indicated my own thermos. Without a word, he placed the coffee on the windowsill. He didn't look offended. That small gesture, even more than his earlier apology, convinced me that he could accept a refusal without treating it as a personal insult.

Inside the office, I prepared a revised schedule. I'd moved the meeting with the client to the following afternoon, agreed on the additional calculations with my practice, and asked Marek Sowiński to secure access to the measurement points. Every change meant more hours of work, but this time I wasn't going to let a deadline dictate our technical decisions.

Dominik sat opposite me and examined the printout.

"I see you have no intention of waiting for my suggestions."

"I didn't hire you to manage my calendar."

"Point taken."

I handed him a sheet of paper covered in numbered provisions.

"I want us to establish some rules for working together. Before we start arguing about things that really matter."

He read the document and raised his eyebrows.

"Six points?"

"Seven. The last one's on the second page."

"'Technical comments must be communicated without publicly undermining the other party's competence,'" he read aloud. "Is that a reference to yesterday?"

"To yesterday and several experiences I have no intention of repeating."

"Reasonable."

I'd expected him to start negotiating. Instead, he took out his pen and added a provision of his own.

"Any discrepancy affecting safety must be entered in the official register, regardless of who identifies it."

I examined the sentence.

"Agreed. Provided every concern includes a specific justification and a proposed method of verification."

"Accepted."

"And provided you don't present problems to me as riddles."

He smiled.

"That particular requirement may call for some work on my character."

I signed our agreement and pushed the paper towards him. He added his signature in neat, legible handwriting. For a moment, I studied our names side by side. It was an ordinary working document, hardly a significant declaration, yet I had the strange impression we'd just created something more than a schedule.

"One more thing," I said. "If we disagree about a solution, we don't settle the matter by dragging out the discussion until one of us becomes too tired to argue."

"How do you propose we resolve it?"

"With data. And if there's still a disagreement, with an independent opinion."

Dominik turned his pen between his fingers for a moment.

"That could take time."

"I know."

"And cost money."

"I know that too."

"Good."

I looked at him.

"That's all?"

"We've agreed on a principle. I see no reason to challenge it merely because I might dislike the outcome someday."

To my surprise, I felt relieved.

Before noon, we received the first series of readings. They didn't yet establish the cause of the previous day's displacement, but they allowed us to narrow the scope of further analysis. Rather than spend another several hours working on two competing models, I proposed preparing a single reference case and two alternative methods of reinforcing the connection.

Dominik pulled his chair closer to my workstation.

"May I?"

I shifted my laptop so he could see the screen.

"Please."

For several minutes, we compared values. When I pointed out a change to the boundary conditions I wanted to test, he leaned closer and followed the load path on the diagram.